



## **Fr. Gabriel Mark Coless, O.S.B.**

**January 24, 1931-February 12, 2024**

One of our senior and most beloved confreres, Fr. Gabriel Mark Coless, O.S.B., returned home to the Lord on the morning of December 3 in the Abbey Health Care Center, as his confreres were praying Matins. Fr. Gabriel was born in Bayonne on January 24, 1931, to Mark Coless (the anglicized version of Marco Colasurdo, as he became known upon arrival at Ellis Island), a pharmacist, and Bolesława "Bessie" Boneska. According to Fr. Gabriel's file, his mother, Bessie, was born in NY Harbor!

Fr. Gabriel was baptized Mark Philip at Our Lady of Assumption Church, Bayonne, May 4, 1931. The Coless Family was blessed with five children: Mark, Thomas, Robert, Louis and Marie. The family moved to Newark, where Fr. Gabriel was confirmed by the Most Rev. Thomas A. Boland, archbishop of Newark, at their parish, St. Bridget's, on June 11, 1943. Fr. Gabriel attended St. Bridget's Grammar School, and was accepted at St. Benedict's Prep for his secondary education. Fr. Gabriel was graduated in 1948. One of his classmates was Francis Reilly, later Fr. Rembert of St. Mary's Abbey (+2020).

After graduating from St. Benedict's Prep, Fr. Gabriel was a divinity student at Seton Hall University, South Orange, NJ, before applying for admission to St. Mary's Abbey. Fr. Gabriel completed his novitiate at St. Benedict's Abbey, Atchison, Kansas. He professed simple vows, July 11, 1953, and completed his undergraduate education at St. Vincent College, Latrobe, Pa. From 1954 to 1956, Fr. Gabriel studied Latin at the University of Notre Dame, South Bend, In. In Morristown, he completed his theological studies at St. Mary's Abbey School of Theology, and was ordained priest by the Most Rev. James A. McNulty, bishop of Paterson, May 25, 1957. Fr. Gabriel celebrated his First Mass at Blessed Sacrament Church, Newark, on May 26, 1957.

From 1956 to 1959, Fr. Gabriel studied Romance Philology at Columbia, University, New York. Beginning in 1964, He was enrolled at the Pontificio Ateneo Sant'Anselmo, Rome, where he studied Liturgy and Patristic Theology. In 1966, Fr. Gabriel was awarded a Licentiate degree, and a doctorate in Liturgy in 1967.

Fr. Gabriel is remembered as a great educator in a variety of institutions. From 1951 to 1958, at Delbarton School, Morristown. From 1958 to 1964, he taught at this Alma Mater, St. Benedict's Prep. After returning from Rome, Fr. Gabriel taught at both Delbarton School both in the school until 1972 and at St. Mary's Abbey School of Theology until 1971. He also taught at Caldwell College, Caldwell, NJ, for several years: 1971-1973. Beginning in 1968, however, Fr. Gabriel began a long and distinguish career on the faculty of Drew University, Madison, NJ. He taught a variety of courses in the Religious Studies program on the graduate and doctoral levels. These were often intimate seminars on very specific topics. One example is a thorough reading

of Dante's Divine Comedy in Italian! Even though he had not taught at Drew for a number of years, Fr. Gabriel was still fondly remembered by colleagues at the time of his death. throughout his life Fr. Gabriel radiated a love of language and words. This was especially apparent in his preaching.

Fr. Gabriel distinguished himself in the areas of preaching and liturgy especially within monastic circles. In the aftermath of Vatican II and the ensuing liturgical reforms, Fr. Gabriel was instrumental in the major overhaul of the liturgy at St. Mary's Abbey. He is largely the architect of the current Divine Office, and was involved in collaborative revisions in the 1990s in his capacity as chairman of the abbey's liturgy committee. For more than 40 years, Fr. Gabriel selected the non-Scriptural readings for Vigils. With his astute mind, he carefully combed through a variety of sources, both ancient and modern to select just the right text. Some of these readings could be dense and required the reader and listener to concentrate closely. Others could be more whimsical as the occasion warranted. He was always open to suggestions from the brethren. He also composed the Universal Prayers still used today at the Conventual Mass for Sundays, solemnities and feasts.

Fr. Gabriel will long be remembered for his dramatic interpretations of Scripture or other readings. These would often be accompanied by gesture or intonation for emphasis or dramatic effect! His preaching was brilliant, insightful and intriguing. One never knew quite what to expect, and one was rarely disappointed. As was noted at the Requiem Mass sung on the day of his death, Fr. Gabriel was entirely focused on the *kerygma* of the Word. The Greek word itself means "to cry or proclaim as a herald." Fr. Gabriel was every bit a prophetic voice or herald. Even in his latter days, living the abbey health center, Fr. Gabriel was an active participant in the Sunday Mass celebrated in the solarium, whether as a lector or spontaneous cantor of the psalm! His *kerygma* was only silenced and stilled by the effects of his mortality, of which he was most mindful.

When he moved to the health center, it was necessary for him to relinquish most of the spaces he occupied throughout the monastery. Those given the task of going through his personal effects became well aware of his love for books- thousands of which had to be sorted. Many needed to be returned to the abbey library or to the person from whom they were acquired. Fr. Gabriel was the quintessential Renaissance man. He loved art and music, as the hundreds of LPs in his collection can testify. He often listened to music while he was working or studying in his office. As his hearing worsened, so did the rest of the community!

Fr. Gabriel also faithfully ministered in various parishes and to local women religious. He authored many articles published in journals, and was widely known as a retreat master. Fr. Gabriel also enjoyed membership in many organizations: The American Academy of Religion, the North American Academy of Liturgy and the New Jersey Herb Society of America, to name a few. He would often use his herbs for home remedies and concoctions served at Christmas gatherings. His mulled wine was a regular and familiar fragrance during the holidays!

Fr. Gabriel was a well-traveled man and explored many parts of the globe. He enjoyed the emersion into different languages and cultures. One of his notable experiences was his participation in the East-West dialogue with monks and nuns from the Christian and Buddhist

traditions. In the mid-80s, he was part of a group of Benedictine monks and sisters who traveled to India to experience the monastic life in Tibetan Buddhist monasteries. This trek included a visit with the Dalai Lama. On his return to the monastery, Fr. Gabriel regaled the brethren with a slide presentation.

Even in his declining years, when a fall and ill health rendered him more and more frail, Fr. Gabriel remained as he always was: Cheerful, welcoming and without guile! When the warm sun shone, you could be sure Fr. Gabriel would be seated outside the health center, basking, even if it wasn't a balmy summer's day! Music was often heard from his room, and Fr. Gabriel was at peace in his chair with his life well lived and loved

Fr. Gabriel's body will be received at the abbey church on Thursday, February 15 at 1:30 p.m., with viewing that afternoon from 2-4 p.m. The Office of the Dead will be sung at 7 p.m. that night. The Funeral Mass and interment in the abbey cemetery will be celebrated Friday, February 16 at 10:30 a.m. Those unable to attend may view the liturgy via livestream on the abbey's YouTube account. Donations in Fr. Gabriel's memory to support abbey capital improvements, monks' health care or abbey endowment may be made using the link: <https://www.saintmarysabbey.org/support-us>.

Abbot Jonathan Licari and the monks of St. Mary's Abbey request the customary suffrages for our confrere, Fr. Gabriel.