



Father Thomas GERIS
(1935 - 2014)

*Died 15 January 2014, in Zoersel (Belgium)
aged 78, with 56 years of Religious Profession.*

Tom was born in Gellik (B) on 13th March 1935. After primary school in his village he went to Rotselaar for his secondary schooling (1947-1954). He wanted to become a Montfortian priest, but he first did his military service (at the time it was 18 months). He did his noviciate in D'Hoppe (B) and took his first vows on 8th September 1957. Then he did his scholasticate in Oirschot (NL) and was ordained priest on 24th March 1963. He dreamed of doing missionary work, a dream that came true.

First he learned French in the neighbourhood of Paris and after the usual sermons and collections in favour of his future mission, he left at the end of 1963 for the Congo. Already in the first months of 1964 there was a rebellion in the south-east of the country which soon spread to Stanleyville (now Kisangani). Tom started his missionary work in these days of chaos. It was all completely different from what he had in mind. But he managed to survive the storms of the rebellion together with most of his confreres and sisters. Back in Belgium he was able to recover and became a teacher of religion in a technical school in Mechelen a/d Maas. But the call of the Congo never really left him and in 1968 he left again. It was the start of a very beautiful time. Being a 'jungle father' was really his cup of tea. Tom never cared for great theories but he was a man of action, close to the people. In a way the country was peaceful, but there was some bitterness as well. Tom was one of the few missionaries in the diocese who had survived the rebellion and more than anyone else he sensed the tension. It was with great regret he returned to Belgium in 1977.

It was not the first time that the vicariate of the military forces had asked for a chaplain, especially for the barracks in Germany. The province suggested Tom might be the right person. Without hesitation he accepted the job. A new beginning. It was the time when serving in the army was compulsory and a lot of soldiers lived in Germany with their wives and children. People much appreciated a warm and social atmosphere and this was exactly Tom's strength: to be with the people, organize first communion feasts, catechism, weddings, sharing the joys and woes of the soldiers and their families. Again he was fully and completely a priest.

After the Berlin wall collapsed in 1989 and the borders in Europe were no longer a strict issue the Belgian military people gradually returned home. In 1992 Tom joined them and after that he served as a chaplain in different places in the north of the country till he retired in 2000. So what do you do when you are 65 and a retired priest? In the past when he was still a chaplain he had already assisted in different parishes. Now he was offered a fulltime job as curate in the federation of Merksplas and he was given a place to stay in the smaller

parish of Zondereigen. In 2012 the Sisters of the convent of Betlehem asked him to become their pastor and at the same time pastor of 't Zwart Goor, a large care centre for adults with a physical and/or mental handicap. Due to his warm character he soon became a well-loved and much-appreciated person who often visited the people in their own houses. At the same time he continued serving the parishes of Merksplas and Zondereigen.

In July 2013 he went on holiday with his family. On this occasion he realized something was wrong with his body. His family advised him to consult a doctor and not without a reason. His calvary started in August: pancreas cancer; an operation was necessary, waiting and hoping for the best. Tom was very well aware of his critical situation and the day before his operation he asked for the sacrament of Extreme Unction. It was a very complex surgery and it appeared to be successful. After a long time in hospital he returned to Zwart Goor for rehabilitation. Short walks in the beautiful gardens and most of all the warm welcome of the Sisters gave him strength but not for long. He knew things were not right. In the meantime it was Advent, Christmas time. Tom asked again for the comfort of Extreme Unction. Afterwards he took my hand and said: 'I am ready'. And so it was Christmas, the time of our Lord's coming; many of us imagined that Tom was about to meet Him now.

Tom never was very talkative, he usually took his time before giving an answer. And when the answer came it was short and clear. And also: Tom always meant what he said and did what he said. In those last days the answers to questions on pain or other feelings took even more time than before. What thoughts did he have in mind? Talking about the Congo drew his attention and then it was clear he was interested. It was very difficult speaking with a dry mouth but his eyes made it clear that he enjoyed the conversation. He had a lucid mind till the very end. It was a true moment of grace when all his confreres of his community came to visit him in hospital and it did him good to pray together with them.

On 15th January, the day he died, we listened to young Samuel's story: he thought he had heard God's voice. When he was sure it was God calling, he shouted loud and clear: 'Lord, here I am'. That's the way I imagine Tom's passing away, in those few moments before he died, clearly very lucid.

We are very grateful to the Sisters of Zwart Goor and especially to the members of his family who since August went to visit him in hospital every day and we would like to thank them for all they meant to our confrere. May our Tom find peace now in the Lord.