

ODE TO AN OLD FRIEND
Fr Varghese Paul, S.J.

At 89 he is hardly able to move around freely and yet his spirit soars high. His adventurous spirit takes him to Mount Abu. His love of people and nature burst forth in poetry.

He is Brother Amaro Mattos of the Society of Jesus in Gujarat. I had the privilege of knowing him from the late 1970s. When I took the editorship of DOOT as my first job as a newly ordained Jesuit priest, Brother Mattos used to send me news reports from Vadodara related to the Rosary Parish Church or on important events of Rosary School.

My association with Br Mattos has continued uninterrupted even when I went to New Delhi as the Executive Director of a South Asian Church News Service SAR News. Brother Mattos was then my only reporter from Gujarat.

Over the years our professional relationship has ceased but our friendship has grown with the exchange of letters and occasional visits.

Recently I had the opportunity of spending a few days at Mount Abu with Brother Mattos. My love and appreciation for him has grown by leaps and bounds at Mount Abu. I watched him with admiration sitting alone in the Church and playing his favourite tunes to the Lord on his mouth organ. Occasionally he also played his mouth organ for us, a few fellow Jesuits enjoying the holidays with him.

“Varghese, I have a copy of my poetry book for you,” said Brother Mattos when I reached Mount Abu and accosted him for first time.

“That’s great,” I said simply responding to his infectious smile and the simplicity of a child.

Then, Brother Mattos gave me his second collection of poems entitled “THE PSALMS OF MY LIFE”. There are 39 poems. They reveal Brother Mattos as a wise and contented man in love with nature, God and His people.

Most of his poems are his prayers like the following stanza of his poem entitled “Moments Brief Yet Blissful”:

May I find thee in ev’ry moment of my life -
In sorrow, pain, distress.
Even in joy that overflows heart’s brim.
I know of your loving presence that wills it so
And I own it to you before hence I go!
Wide be the range of my wanderings.

Another poem entitled “Moments Sweets And Amiss” reveal the wisdom of Brother Mattos and his prayerful attitude. Brother Mattos advises us in the poem to pause for a moment. When you are too busy to do so; then you will find peace, he says:

Moments there are, just sweet and never amiss
Midst the world’s pain or bliss;
Take time on the run, pause a moment
To catch up some meaningful thought on the wing
That may help a change for the better in the next move,
To bring you to that point wherein you’ll find
Doubts, fear sorted out by assurance that reminds
That God’s grace is in full evidence!

Brother Mattos knows that he has lived several decades in hope, commitment in efficient services as an educationalist. He has acquired knowledge and wisdom as well as experienced love and joy, which has faithfully passed on to his hundreds and thousands of students over the years.

And yet Brother Mattos is not a spent force but he is replete with new energies and a new spirit of love and joy. Today his mission, as he revealed at Mount Abu, is one of being rather than doing, one of witness rather than of action. In his being and witness he reveals God’s faithful love. So he sings:

Every moment in His Divine Service
Is one of unique grace -
Let each footstep of mine lead me on
Nearer to Thee, O Christ!”

It is a great pleasure to converse with Brother Mattos. He will have words of appreciation for you and for others whom he knows. But you will never hear a complaint or a disparaging word about another person. Once in his room at Vadodara he played a special tune for me on his mouth organ. Then, he read out a few new compositions of his poems. I do not know the literary quality of his poems, as I am not qualified to evaluate them, yet I can appreciate his poems as Brother Mattos communicates his wisdom and love to me through them.

What is marvelous for me is that even in his old age his grace is undiminished. His love for people and nature is as deep as ever. He is a man with no guile. His love knows no malice against anyone.

What St Augustine wrote of old age is literally true about Brother Mattos: “When we grow old, we do not lose what we were before; we build on it. It is too late to change much in the later years of our lives. We need not worry about being graceful in old age, if we were graceful as a child and as an adolescent and as a youth. And so, now that we have come of age, we should stop worrying about how we will be a year from now and begin trying to be as pleasant as we can be today.”

Brother Mattos is my ideal of gracefulness even in old age. In various physical ailments and other disabilities of old age Brother Mattos continues to appreciate and value life and he lives to the full in loving and singing the marvels of God through his poems. Thank you Brother Mattos for the gift of your second collection of poems.