

A LIFE WORTH LIVING
Fr. Varghese Paul, SJ

“To get such a beautiful death and solemn burial like that of your grand father, you need to lead a life like the one of your grand father”, said my brother Vincent to his teen-aged son Sanu.

My mother and all her nine sons and daughters have been sitting around the dining table after supper. We were reminiscing after the solemn burial of our dad. We had gathered together first time after rushing to father’s death-bed from different parts of India. We recalled many memorable events and occasions of our dady’s life. My nephew was deeply impressed by our conversation about dad. Then, my brother Vincent said to his son: “To get such a beautiful death and solemn burial like that of your grand father, you need to lead a life like the one of your grand father.”

After being bed-ridden for six months with long sickness my father died a very peaceful death on 28 September 1999. He was buried after 5 days on October 2 as we waited for my sister Celine to come from Eritrea in Africa. More than two thousand relatives, friends and neighbours joined in the funeral procession on the two-kilometer long way from home to the parish church. The procession, Holy Mass and funeral rites took about 4 hours.

In those days during the proceeding and following weeks there were daily heavy rains in the afternoon and my brothers arranged ambulance and buses for the funeral. But it was nothing short of a miracle that on the day of the funeral there was no rain except a short light shower during the Holy Mass as a sign of the showers of blessings from above. So my father’s relatives, friends, neighbours and others could carry the body in a procession in the traditional way in bright sunlight singing prayer songs and reciting the rosary prayer.

My father’s death too was ideal for all people. In the evening father omitted a little blood. My brother Vincent called a doctor immediately. He was also given the sacrament of sick. At the time of his death my married sister and my three married brothers were at my father’s bedside with their whole families. The doctor called the attention of all towards the ever-weakening heartbeat. As my father had expressed his desire, he died very peacefully in the presence of my mother without whom he could not think of living. He wanted to go before my mother and he did.

My father was an ordinary farmer of middle-income group. He was a just man in every way. In his time he studied up to seventh standard and then joined my grand father in farming.

My grand father sold his inherited property at Vazhakulam and then bought the present land property including paddy fields at Enanalloor. I have heard my father saying that when my grand father bought the property the neighbours has said, “Let us make and save money. The new neighbour Mr. Varkey has six daughters. He will sell his land in pieces to marry away his daughters and give them dowry.”

But thanks to the hard work of my grand father and his whole family my grand father never sold any land. On the contrary my grand father and my father worked hard and made enough money

to buy three plots of land from the neighbours and educated one uncle and two aunties to become school teachers and principals.

In his youth my dad had even hired farmland and cultivated it to make additional income. After working the whole day in such land, a little away from the house on the way back home he used to drink toddy with the labourers. Then, one day he said to himself: if I make dinking a habit then my wife and children may become without any support. So he stopped completely taking toddy or any other intoxicating drinks.

Like an ordinary farmer my father was a hard working man. He had farmland within the limit according to land-law of Kerala. When the new land reform law came into force he did legally transferred a little extra land to his college-going son, Thomas. He was fully occupied all year around with the cultivation of rice, ginger, saffron, coconut, betel nut, rubber, pepper, oil grass and also a variety of vegetables and plantains for the consumption of the family and farm-labourers. He has often employed a number labourers with him for the seasonal works in the farmland.

Sometimes we had 30-35 labourers in the rice field for planting or harvesting rice. He got the works done from the labourers by working along with them like one of them doing as much or more works than a labourers. He also kept very good relationship with the labourers and their families. Some times the farmer-friends of my father complained that it is difficult to get labourers to work in their fields. But my father got as many labourers as he needed as he kept excellent relationship with each one of them. My parent's commitment to our labourers was well known. So the labourers always came to my parents whenever they needed some urgent help.

Love for his family was a unique virtue of my father. My father and mother loved each other so much that in their 69 years of married life, we children had never seen them quarrelling! My father is at home if he is not in the farmland. On Sundays he used to visit his farmer-friends in their houses in the neighbourhood; or one or other neighbour used to drop in to the house in the evening. They talked about farming, marketing of farm-products, social issues, labourers etc. while sharing tea and snacks at home. Father was always home for family prayer and supper with the whole family.

Both my father and mother used to chew betel-leaf, betel-nut and tobacco every day after supper. Then, my father and mother talked long about family, relatives and farm matters while chewing tobacco. My parents discussed every matter concerning them during these times together and decided together on everything.

Like at home my father kept very a good relationship with the relatives and neighbours and kept himself up to date with every thing especially about farm matters. He was ahead of other neighbours in some matters. My father was the first to plant rubber in our neighbourhood. Today most of Kerala is covered with rubber plantation. Way back in 1964 my father built three toilets and bathrooms in a row attached to my house as he had seen in public institutions like priests residence and convents. The toilets were something of wonder for neighbours. Till the toilets were built we used to go and sit behind buses with stick to drive away pigs, which cleaned our toilets as soon as we moved away.

Our parents gave us education and formed our characters mostly with their own personal examples. My parents had deep faith and trust in God and their lives were in tune with their faith. They never failed to attend Sunday liturgical services in the Church. Like all practicing Catholic Christians they never missed the Sunday Holy Mass. Then we had daily family prayers late in the evening in which all including children participated fully. If my father had gone out for some reason or another, he made sure that he is back in time for family prayer followed by supper. He insisted that we too are back at home for family rosary and supper.

During his final years he was not able to work in the field with the farm labourers. Then, he made it a practice to go to church every day morning and participate in the Holy Mass.

My father had achieved many things in life. With his hard work he bought three times the amount of land which he got by inheritance from his father. God has blessed him and our whole family abundantly. My father had only one way to acquire wealth: hard work. He was extremely grateful to God for his achievements and he generously gave alms to the needy and the poor.

Once giving thanks to God for his abundant blessings my father said to my younger brother Vincent that he never thought that one day he would ride in an Ambassador car.

The famous English writer Barnard Shaw said about life that, creating one's life is a long, laborious and painful process. Life from birth to death is indeed a long process. If you are able to built up a world of your own, different from others, only then your life is considered a success. But it is easy to appropriate the life which someone else has created. These words of Barnard Shaw are proved true by my father's just and successful life.

A year before his death he had an attack of thrombosis, that is, bursting of nerve on his head and he was unconscious for five days. But my father returned from the mouth of death, as he was accustomed to fight his way in life. He was recovered enough to move around in the house and in the courtyard on his own for about six months. Then with the paralysis of his right side he became bed ridden.

During the last six months of his life my father was fully bed-ridden. He was helpless to do anything on his own. Yet he had no complaint and was happy in lying on his bed. It was a great blessing to my whole family that my sister-in-law Aice left nothing to be desired in nursing my father. My aged mother was at his bedside 24 hours a day. In sickness as in life my father led a very dignified life as an example for all his children. Once when I was with him when he was paralyzed and bed ridden, he told me half jokingly and half seriously, "I have even learnt to pass urine and shit lying on my bed."

Indeed my father's life was so inspiring and exemplary that my brother could truly say to his son, "To get such a beautiful death and solemn burial like that of your grand father, you need to lead a life like the one of your grand father."