Obituaries

Astrik L. Gabriel, O.Praem., former Director and Professor Emeritus of the Medieval Institute at the University of Notre Dame, died at the age of 97 on May 16,
2005. He had been in failing health and resided at Dujaric Hall of Holy Cross College, yet continued to work in his office at Notre Dame until the very end.

Gabriel was born in Pécs, Hungary, on December 10, 1907, attended the local schools, and in 1926 entered the Canons of Premontre, an order well known in Central Europe for the excellence of its schools and the learning of its members. He was ordained in 1931.

Meanwhile, in 1929, Gabriel matriculated at the University of Budapest and followed a demanding curriculum. Among his professors were some of the greatest scholars of that university during the interwar years. His training was thorough and extensive and prepared him for a life of vigorous intellectual activity. His abilities were soon recognized by his mentors, and he was sent to study at the École des Hautes Études and the École des Chartes in France. Following in the footsteps of many of his medieval countrymen, who had gone to study at the famous University of Paris, Gabriel arrived in the City of Lights in 1932. The young Hungarian student soon became a familiar sight at the Sorbonne and the Bibliothèque Nationale. His French professors and fellow students soon recognized his brilliance, and thus began a long line of friendships which tied him to Paris and France for a lifetime. Gabriel devoted himself to his studies, but did not neglect to visit the restaurants and bistros, as well as academic and non-academic taverns, for which Paris is so famous.

Upon his return to Hungary from Paris, Gabriel received his doctorate summa cum laude in 1936, and was subsequently appointed Director of the French College at Gödöllő, recently established by the Canons of Premontre.

The dark storm clouds of war were approaching his native land when in 1941 Dr. Gabriel was appointed Privatdozent at the University of Budapest. His appointment was the result of the sound scholarship which he displayed in the ever increasing number of his publications. Drawing upon materials he discovered at Paris, several of his articles dealt with Hungarian students and professors who had attended the Parensc Scienciarum in the Middle Ages. The study of the medieval University of Paris began to play an increasingly important role in the scholarly life of Dr. Gabriel, although he also showed interest in a variety of historical and literary problems.

During the fateful year of 1944, when Hungary was invaded first by Nazi Germany and then by the Red Army, Dr. Gabriel was hard at work and published two books as well as several shorter studies. His first major book, Les rapports dynastiques Franco-Hongrois au moyen âge, was based on meticulous archival research, and did much to enhance his reputation in Hungary as well as in France. The German occupiers of Hungary were furious that such a book could appear and tried to suppress it. It is a strange coincidence that the second volume he published in 1944 was a study on the life of the then recently canonized St. Margaret of Hungary, a royal princess who was deeply influenced by the new spirituality preached by the mendicants in the thirteenth century and who ended her life in a Dominican convent on an island in the Danube near the Hungarian
capital. In 1982, Canon Gabriel was elevated to titular provost and mitred abbot of the Church of the Premontrés on that same island, now known as St. Margaret Island. His church is but a few hundred feet from where St. Margaret had lived and died.

The end of World War II in 1945 brought fundamental changes in the life of Dr. Gabriel. The French College, which had been a safe haven for Allied airmen shot down over Hungary and who were protected at no small personal risk by its brave young director, was now occupied by the Soviet Army. During the siege of Budapest Dr. Gabriel endured much privation and lost his whole library and all his research notes. After the war, he tried to reopen the college, but soon realized that nationalization of all Catholic educational institutions was imminent and that a Communist takeover was inevitable. He, therefore, left his native land in 1947 and headed for Paris. Over ten difficult years had passed since he had left the city on the Seine, but those who remembered him as an eager and talented student welcomed him now as a recognized scholar. His friend Etienne Gilson extended an invitation to him to become a guest professor at the Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies in Toronto. In 1948, Gabriel became a professor at Notre Dame and was appointed Director of the Medieval Institute in 1952, a position he held until his retirement in 1975. The difficulties and uncertainties of the war years behind him, Professor Gabriel became a more productive scholar than ever before. The intellectual and spiritual life of the medieval University of Paris and its colleges became the focus of his attention leading to the publication of Student Life at Ave Maria College in 1955, which received the Thorlet Prize, and Skara House at the Medieval University of Paris in 1960.

Among his many books and publications, the one work which has the greatest scholarly value is the Liber receptorum of the English-German Nation at the University of Paris, published in 1964 as volume VI of the Auctarium Chartularii Universitatis Parisiensis. The Liber receptorum contains a gold mine of information and is an unequaled record of the intellectual life of fifteenth-century Paris. It received the Dourlans Prize of the French Academy. In the years that have elapsed since the publication of the Liber receptorum, Professor Gabriel continued to pour forth books and articles with regularity. Paris and its colleges, British, Scottish, Irish, Hungarian, and Colonial American institutions of higher education have received his attention. His interests were truly universal.

A few days before his death, he completed the manuscript of a book about a group of early sixteenth-century Parisian printers and the works they had published. Many of these rare volumes were eventually acquired by American book collectors and have found their way into the major libraries in the United States. Gabriel looked upon this, his last work, as a labor of love, a token of gratitude to this country, which had given him refuge and a chance to begin his academic career anew. It would be a fitting tribute to him if this valuable work, prepared with such dedication, could be published posthumously.

The list of his accomplishments is long and impressive. Twice he was a member of the Institute of Advanced Study at Princeton University. He also served as
visiting professor at Harvard and the Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies in Toronto. Gabriel was an elected member of the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles Lettres, and a corresponding member of the French Academy, a member of the Bayerische Akademie der Wissenschaften and an Honorary Member of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. He was a Fellow of the Medieval Academy of America, of the Société de l'Histoire de France, the Royal Historical Society in London, and a Member of the Comité International de Paléographie Latine. In 1973 he was President of the American Catholic Historical Association, of which he had become a member in 1948, and he was also President of the International Commission for the History of Universities. Professor Gabriel was an Honorary Doctor of the Bibliotheca Ambrosiana of Milan, the University of Budapest (ELTE), and the Pázmány Péter Catholic University of Hungary. The Governments of France, Italy, Hungary, and the Holy See (Pro Ecclesia et Pontifici-Gold) have recognized his outstanding contributions to scholarship and to the Church.

When in 1960, Cardinal Montini suggested that the new library at Notre Dame could become a repository of microfilms containing classical, medieval, and Renaissance manuscripts and drawings from Milan's Bibliotheca Ambrosiana, President Theodore Hesburgh, C.S.C., knew that this monumental task could be entrusted to only one man: "Gabe," as he affectionately called Gabriel. Cutting through layers of inflexible bureaucracy and persuading reluctant personnel, Professor Gabriel cajoled, pressured, wined and dined, and even on occasion threatened, but got the job done. The Frank M. Folsom Ambrosiana Microfilm and Photographic Collection undertaken with the support of the Samuel H. Kress Foundation and the National Science Foundation has been a gold mine for American scholars.

Another enduring legacy he left at Notre Dame is the Astrik L. Gabriel University Collection established in 1983, which is among the world's richest treasure troves of materials on the history of higher education. Thousands of printed primary and secondary sources, more than 4,000 microfilms of medieval university archival materials, journals, wax replicas of seals, photographs of early buildings, and other items related to academic life, make up this invaluable collection, which will provide thesis and dissertation topics for generations of graduate students.

As a teacher Professor Gabriel was able to transmit the excitement and joy of research and discovery to us, his students. Working with him was a unique experience. It was far more than study, research, and dissertations. It was an engaging relationship with an extraordinary man, in whom the spirit of the medieval master was wedded to that of the modern scholar. He was teacher, director, lord and master, and, at times, a caring father to us. While never blurring the distinction between master and disciple, he made us his partners in a rigorous but exciting search for knowledge. Later in life, he welcomed us as colleagues and dear friends, for which we will be always grateful.

Canon Gabriel was a cosmopolitan in the best sense of the word. Multi-lingual and well traveled, he was equally at ease in the hallowed halls of the French
Academy or a sports bar near campus. He could converse about politics with the Italian Prime Minister but would also inquire about the sick child of the waitress who served him at a South Bend restaurant.

The Notre Dame academic community and his many friends said their farewells to Abbot Gabriel during the funeral Mass celebrated on May 20 in the Basilica of the Sacred Heart with the Reverend Theodore Hesburgh, C.S.C., presiding. In his eulogy he remembered Gabriel as an extraordinary man, one of the brightest lights among the graduate faculty, and as a dear friend. Canon Gabriel was then transported to the Norbertine Abbey of Daylesford, near Philadelphia, where he was buried among his confreres on May 24, surrounded by relatives, several of his former students, and friends. Requiescat in pace.

L. S. Domokos

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