

THE ORTHODOX WORD

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St. Gabriel the Fool-for-Christ of Samtavro



St. Gabriel (Urgebadze), Fool-for-Christ of the Samtavro Convent in Georgia
(†1995, commemorated October 20/November 2).



*From this day, from this hour,
from this minute, let us strive to love God
above all, and fulfill His holy will.*

—St. Herman of Alaska

THE ORTHODOX WORD

For the Mission of True Orthodox Christianity

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by Nun Cornelia (Rees)

Front cover: Icon of St. Gabriel of Samtavro. Entitled “Consolation and Love-giver,” this is one of the most popular icons of St. Gabriel, painted by Alexy Mgebrishvili and published by Otar Nikolaishvili, a spiritual son of the saint and the author of a book about his miracles.

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TROPARION

to St. Gabriel (Urgebadze), Fool-for-Christ of Samtavro

As the Master Christ hid His divinity, * clothing it in humanity, * and, unseen by us, brought into being His ineffable glory, * likewise didst thou hide thy glory by means of foolishness, * and by the wonder of thy confession wast shown forth as a shepherd of souls; * O venerable Father Gabriel, * entreat Christ God to have mercy on our souls.

St. Gabriel the Fool-for-Christ of Samtavro

by Nun Cornelia (Rees)

*They wandered about in sheepskins and
goatskins; being destitute, afflicted, tormented;
(of whom the world was not worthy) (Heb. 11:37–38).*

RELATIVELY RECENTLY in the republic of Georgia, a man who in his lifetime had drunk to the dregs the cup of human scorn was glorified as a saint by his mother Church. St. Gabriel (Urgebadze) was known and venerated especially throughout his native and beloved Georgia, as well as beyond that blessed portion of the Mother of God. A great ascetic, a confessor, a priest, a fool-for-Christ—Elder Gabriel seemed to embody an almost archetypal sanctity; one could almost say that he was to Georgia what St. Seraphim of Sarov was to Russia—only so close to us in time that we can now easily find his spiritual children among the living.

In an earlier issue of *The Orthodox Word* (no. 166, 1992), Elder Gabriel was introduced to English language readers through a narrative by Valeria Alfeyeva¹ that depicted the saint's exploits as a confessor of the faith.² A companion article was written by Monk (now Archimandrite)

¹ Valeria Alfeyeva is the mother of Metropolitan Hilarion (Alfeyev) of Volokolamsk, head of the Church External Relations Department of the Russian Orthodox Church.

² Valeria Alfeyeva, "Dying and Yet Behold We Live: The Story of a Confessor of Christ in Contemporary Georgia," in *The Orthodox Word*, no. 166 (1992), pp. 216–28.

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Gerasim (Eliel), who was blessed to have visited and spoken with St. Gabriel just a few years before the elder's repose in 1995.³ Fr. Gerasim noted that although the elder was very willing to talk about monasticism and Church life in Georgia, and to offer edifying words, he spoke very little about himself. Twenty years later, on December 20, 2012, Fr. Gabriel (Urgebadze) was canonized, and on February 22, 2015, his incorrupt relics were uncovered. Here we present more about this saint's extraordinary life: the hidden life of a man in God, of which his spiritual gifts were the visible fruit.⁴

I. CHILDHOOD

*But I thy servant fear the Lord
from my youth* (I Kings 18:12).

The future St. Gabriel was born in Tbilisi on August 26, 1929, the youngest of three children, and given the name Goderdzi by his parents Basil and Barbara Urgebadze. Not long after his birth, his father was murdered under mysterious circumstances, and everyone began calling the boy Vasiko (a diminutive of Vasily, or Basil) out of respect for his father. His family remembers him as being an unusually kind and serious child, who distanced himself from the antics of his peers. One of his favorite activities was to build little churches out of pebbles and light matches over them as candles. This urge to build a house of God came solely from within: this was a dangerous time for religious believers in the Soviet Union, and his family, although baptized, out of fear did not lead a religious life. Vasiko would only learn about the existence of Christ seemingly by accident.

³ Monk Gerasim (Eliel), "Father Gabriel and the Last Georgian Elders," *The Orthodox Word*, no. 166 (1992), pp. 229–39.

⁴ Information for this Life was taken from the book, *Yurodivy Gavriil (Urgebadze), Prepodobnoispovednik* [Fool-for-Christ Gabriel (Urgebadze), Monastic Saint-Confessor], by Archimandrite Kirion (Oniani) (Moscow: Sretensky Monastery Publishing, 2015).

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One day, when he was seven years old, Vasiko heard his neighbor arguing with another neighbor, who said, “You’ve tormented me like Christ on the Cross!” This intrigued the boy, so he went to the man who said it and asked him, “Who is Christ, and why was He tormented on the Cross?” The neighbor was afraid to talk about Christ, but told him to go to the local church, where he would find the answer. The church had been closed by the Communists, but a guard worked there. Finding no peace until he received an answer to this vital question, Vasiko asked the guard. The guard opened the church and showed him the Crucifix. “This is Christ on the Cross. If you want to know more about Him, you have to read the Life of Christ.”

These words sent Vasiko on a quest to find the Life of Christ. He saved his coins, earned by running errands for his uncle, until he had a sufficient sum of seventy rubles. Vasiko set off for the book market. He asked the vendors if any might have the “Life of Christ,” but no one did. Finally he saw a kindly old man who sold him a New Testament, naming the price of exactly seventy rubles. As Vasiko was leaving the market, he began to have doubts—he was looking for the Life of Christ, but the man had sold him a book with a different name. However, when he returned to the market the man was no longer there, and no one else there had ever even seen him.

Vasiko’s burning desire to learn about Christ began to be stoked. He read the book day and night, fanning the flame of his pious curiosity. As a little time went on, his reading of the Gospel inspired him toward asceticism, as if he were being inwardly informed that this would lead him to a greater knowledge of God. He alternated reading and praying, depriving himself of basic comforts. One night, as he was sitting on the balcony and thinking about the mysteries of life, he heard an inner voice that said, “Look at the heavens!” He looked up, and there in the sky was a huge cross of shining light. “I didn’t know it at the time,” Fr. Gabriel said to his spiritual children just before his death, “but now I know that this was my cross, which I would have to carry out of love of neighbor.”

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But this revelation would be followed by temptation. As Vasiko lay in bed, a terrible horned demon came to him, demanding, "Why are you wrestling with me?!" and struck him a blow with his fist on the head. Vasiko lost consciousness, and his mother rushed him the next day to the doctor. Only through God's grace was he saved. This vision of a demon did not frighten him, but it did lead him to a greater belief in God. "If the demons exist, then God surely exists," he thought. And thus he was spurred on to even greater asceticism. All his thoughts began to turn to God.

By age twelve, Vasiko was already known by those around him as a saintly child. Miracles even occurred. For example, St. George the Great Martyr appeared to the boy and told him to clean up his church. During those terrible, godless times, the Communist government, which had subjugated Georgia together with Russia and the other republics, was everywhere destroying and desecrating churches, and one of these was the Church of St. George in Tbilisi. Vasiko went to do as St. George had asked, but some of the rocks strewn around were so heavy that even a neighbor known for his great strength was unable to lift them. After praying, "In the Name of the Lord," and making the sign of the Cross over a heavy rock, Vasiko easily lifted it and carried it away.

The atheist regime was having its effect on the people of Georgia, and many had abandoned church services and praying before icons. As his zeal increased for all things sacred, Vasiko would ask everyone he knew to give him their icons if they weren't going to cherish them themselves. He even told each one where they had hidden their icons, and that he would gladly return them if they wished to use them in prayer. The boy's clairvoyance amazed people, and many began taking their icons out of hiding for prayer. Others gave them to Vasiko, who hung them lovingly in his room, which increasingly resembled a monastic cell.

Seeing his constant devotion to prayer and his unabashed collection and loving veneration of icons, his mother became worried and anxious. Barbara began scolding her son for his "fanaticism," and asking

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him why he could not live a normal life like everyone else. “Why do you have to be interested in nothing but God and religion?” Such questions were absurd to the boy, for even at that young age he could live no other way. By the time he was twelve he had already taken up his cross and followed after Christ, and there could be no thought of dropping the plough after putting his hand to it. All of this led to conflicts with his mother, who even beat him for his “disobedience.” He would not stop living the way he did, and his mother would not cease trying to make him stop. When his mother took his Gospel and threw the book in the trash, shouting, “It’s ruined your life!” Vasiko understood that he had no choice but to leave home.

Vasiko retrieved his treasure and cleaned it off. He pressed it to his chest, sobbing uncontrollably. That night, after the family had gone to sleep, he packed his Gospel and a few things, and left home.

Vasiko walked all night and all the next day, until he arrived at the Samtavro Convent⁵ in the ancient capital of Mtskheta. The abbess fed him and warmed him with hospitality, but told him that he could not stay at a women’s monastery, and that he had better go to Svetitskhoveli,⁶ a men’s monastery located in the same area. Vasiko liked Samtavro, and prayed before the icon of the Iveron Mother of God to give him a cell there. This prayer would be granted much later, but for now he was compelled to leave.

The abbot of Svetitskhoveli took in Vasiko with great love, but in those days there was a law that children could not stay in monasteries. He was allowed to stay for three days before he was sent on to the Monastery of St. Shio of Mgvime, and from there to the Zedazeni Monastery. The fathers at Zedazeni were taken by the boy’s zeal, and after three days built him a small cell in a hidden area, where they

⁵ Samtavro Convent is a prominent women’s monastery in Georgia. It was founded in the fourth century, soon after the repose of St. Nino, Equal-to-the-Apostles and Enlightener of Georgia, on the location where she preached.

⁶ The main cathedral of Georgia and a men’s monastery, where the Robe of the Lord is kept.

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Svetitskhoveli Cathedral, Mtskheta.

allowed him to live. After several weeks he was forced to leave due to pressure from the Cheka,⁷ and went to Betania Monastery.

Betania Monastery,⁸ where St. Gabriel was only able to live for

⁷ The Soviet secret police force that preceded the KGB.

⁸ The Betania Monastery of the Nativity of the Mother of God is a medieval Georgian Orthodox monastery in eastern Georgia, located ten miles southwest of Tbilisi, the nation's capital. It was built during the "Golden Age" of the Kingdom of Georgia, in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries. When St. Gabriel went there, Betania Monastery was not officially considered active—it was simply recognized as a "distinguished architectural monument"; the monks were considered its guards, and were even paid for that job. But, in fact, it functioned as an active monastery: lampadas burned before the icons in the church, candles were lit, divine services were conducted, and the fathers wore monastic garb. The faithful came on feast days, there were cross processions and baptisms, and marriage ceremonies were performed. (<http://www.pravoslavie.ru/english/print42411.htm>).



Above: St. Shio Mgvime Monastery. Below: Zedazeni Monastery.



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The church of Betania Monastery.

two weeks due to the same Soviet restrictions mentioned above, would nevertheless become his new school of monasticism and spiritual life. Laboring there were two monks of holy life, now canonized saints.⁹ These were St. John (Maisuradze)¹⁰ and St. George-John (Mkheidze).¹¹

⁹ The Holy Synod of the Georgian Orthodox Church, at a session on August 18, 2003, canonized the holy confessors Archimandrite John (Maisuradze) and Archimandrite George-John (Mkheidze). They are commemorated on September 8/21.

¹⁰ Archimandrite John (in the world, Vasily Maisuradze) was born in Tsinkvali in 1882. As a child he often labored in Betania Monastery. In 1903 he arrived on Mt. Athos, and was later tonsured there. After miraculously surviving being shot in the back at the Monastery of St. Armaz by the Communists, St. John returned to Betania, where he lived the rest of his life. He reposed in 1957.

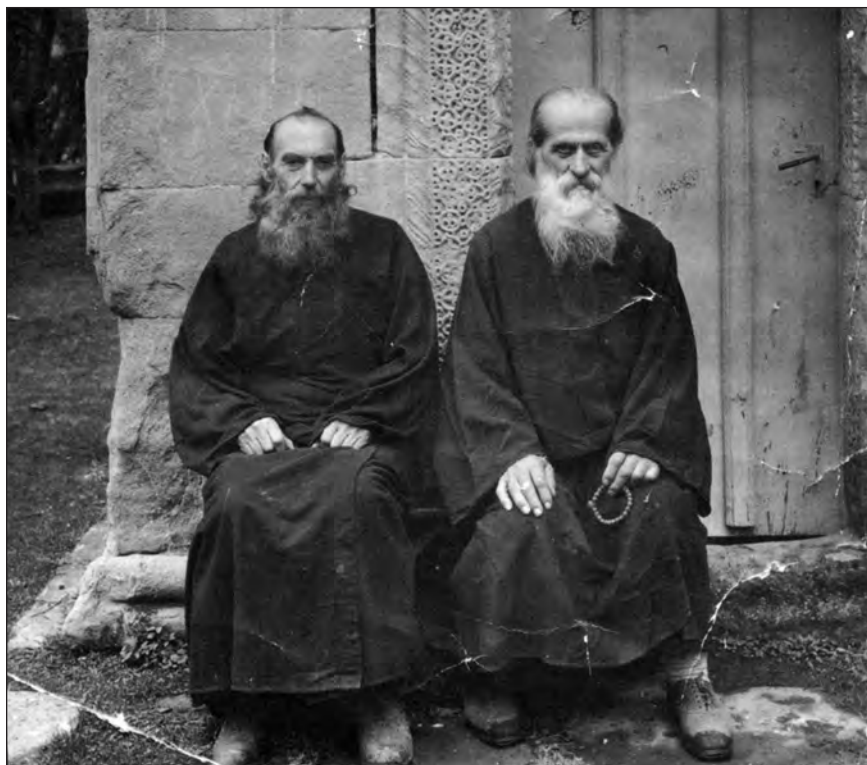
¹¹ Archimandrite George (Mkheidze) was born in the year 1887, in the village of Skhvavi, Ambrolauro region (Racha, Georgia). After receiving his primary education in his village school, the youth was sent to Tbilisi, where with the support of his uncle he continued his studies, serving for a time as personal secretary to righteous Ilia

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St. Gabriel would visit them and stay with them periodically until they left this world. These two monks immediately saw the boy Vasiko's profound love and zeal for Christ, and took his spiritual care and education upon themselves. Although he was beloved by both fathers, St. George became his spiritual father, and shaped and prepared the future saint for a life of sorrows and afflictions.

As we said, these two fathers were essential to St. Gabriel's life. St. John was the softer of the two. He was known for being exceedingly kind and open-hearted, and he felt sorry for Vasiko when Fr. George would assign him labors seemingly beyond the strength of a mere child. But Fr. George was known for his profound wisdom; his love for Vasiko expressed itself in fatherly sternness. Fr. George kept Vasiko busy with physical labor from morning till sundown, and the boy would go to bed each night absolutely exhausted. Fr. John would say, "Have pity on him; after all, he's only a child." "Don't fawn on the boy," Fr. George would say. "Nothing will come of him if you do." St. Gabriel would later recall his early days with the two elders: "Truly Fr. John pitied me, and as for me, my child's heart had a special love for him. But did I ever think badly of Fr. George? How could I possibly allow myself such impudence! From the very beginning I knew that I was dealing with God's holy men. Just being around Fr. John gave me sweet consolation because he always felt sorry for me. But I related to Fr. George with an entirely different respect and reverence. When I was with him or when he looked at me, I watched my every move, even every thought."

When he had to leave Betania, Vasiko continued his self-imposed Chavchavadze (glorified by the Georgian Orthodox Church in 1987 as St. Ilia the Righteous, †1907, commemorated on July 20). Inspired by the life of his older brother who became a monk and recluse, St. George-John also left the world the year his brother died, in 1909. He endured much from the Cheka, a member of which was his own brother. In 1924 he came to Betania, where he labored in asceticism with St. John. The two monks had such oneness of soul that, after St. John died, St. George took his name at his tonsure into the great schema. This is why he is called St. George-John, although St. Gabriel always called him by his original monastic name, George. St. George-John reposed in 1960.



Sts. George-John (Mkheidze) (left) and John (Maisuradze) of Betania Monastery.

childhood exile by returning to Tbilisi to sleep on the streets. It was winter, and he was lightly dressed. A woman named Margo saw him sitting alone in the freezing weather, and after learning that he would under no circumstances return home, she took him in.

Vasiko saw that this was a kind, good woman. But when he learned that she was a popular fortune-teller, he did not immediately know what to do. However, even at such a young age he was able to make a wise decision and show discernment. He felt that he had to be patient. Many people would come to her and he would observe her fortune-telling sessions.

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One day the time came for action. Margo fell sick, and couldn't receive visitors. She was very worried about this, because she would have to turn people away. Vasiko volunteered to fill in. This astounded Margo, but she didn't interfere.

The next day, Vasiko placed icons all over the table and received all the visitors at once. Assembling them there, he preached to them about Christ, the Orthodox Faith, and the salvation of the soul. He told them that they needed to go to church, and that visiting fortune-tellers was a great sin. "The Lord made my mind such that their lives were revealed to me, and I knew them all by name," St. Gabriel later recalled. He gave them warnings about things that were soon to happen, and about their hidden sins, urging them to go to a priest and confess.

Everyone was amazed by this session and left the boy large sums of money, which he in turn gave to Margo, who was more amazed than anyone. Vasiko succeeded in convincing Margo to give up fortune telling, saying to her that it is a grave sin and hateful to God, destructive not only to her soul but to those who come to her. "The devil stands over the fortune-teller as well as those who use her services and he laughs at them, glad that these people have fallen away from the mercy of the Church." Margo listened to her guest and began going to church and leading a spiritual life.

After Vasiko had been away from home for three months, his mother, who had not stopped looking for him, finally found him at Margo's. She promised that she would no longer interfere with his religious life, and he could live as he wished—which for the future saint meant living only for Christ. He continued his prayer and study of the Gospels, but also helped his stepfather at his bread shop. He was extremely compassionate toward the poor, and would not begrudge them free bread. And God did not deprive him of sustenance when he needed it.

For example, once he set out on a pilgrimage to the Martqopi Monastery of the Savior, which had been founded by St. Anthony of Martqopi in the sixth century. It turned out to be further than he had

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expected. He grew very hungry, and although he passed vineyards that had been harvested, he did not dare take any of the leftover grapes. He walked on, dreaming of bread and cheese. Soon he saw two men dressed similar to monks, who invited him to eat a little bread and cheese, even giving him a little wine to drink. After he had parted with them, he thought it strange that they had not asked him about the monastery he was going to visit, although they were dressed like monks. When he turned around, The place where they had sat was empty. The abbot of the monastery heard his description of the strangers, and exclaimed, "That was St. Anthony!"

2. ARMY

Vasiko came of age, and it was time for his mandatory army service. In an atmosphere that might make an ordinary youth lose his religious fervor, Vasiko managed with God's help to attend church and receive Holy Communion. The soldiers were not allowed to leave the base, but Vasiko was given the duty of postman, which enabled him to attend the Liturgy. The priest would take Vasiko into the altar to receive Communion, for if anyone learned of it both Vasiko and the priest would suffer from the Soviet authorities.

Nevertheless, his faith and religious observance could not be entirely hidden from his military leaders and comrades, whose respect and love for him grew continually during his years of service. Thus, when he was discharged he was sent to a medical commission to be declared insane. They asked him about his childhood visions, about his beliefs, and stated that only mentally ill people have such experiences. He was certified mentally ill and unfit for work of any rank or importance. In this way, for the first time, St. Gabriel received this stigma from society, in accordance with the Apostle's words: *For the preaching of the Cross is to them that perish foolishness* (I Cor. 1:18); and *The natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him* (I Cor. 2:14).

3. MONASTICISM

Released from his obligations to society, the future saint began his ascetic labors even more earnestly. In other, more pious times, the young man would have entered a monastery and lived the monastic life. But becoming a monk in Soviet Georgia was a very complicated matter. So, Vasiko built himself a small hut in the yard behind his family's house and gave himself over to prayer. He never missed a service at the Sioni Cathedral,¹² where such a pious young man could not escape the attention of the Patriarch of Georgia, who served there. Catholicos-Patriarch Melchizedek III¹³ asked him to become a reader, and because Vasiko knew the Georgian ecclesiastical language, he would often lead the services. The patriarch watched and tested Vasiko for his steadfastness and reliability, and in 1953 ordained him a subdeacon. But His Holiness had no intention of stopping there.

In 1954, at the patriarch's persistent requests, the government returned the holy relics of Sts. Constantine and David to the monastery named after them in Motsameta, which had been closed. Vasiko was sent there under the care of Bishop Gabriel (Chachanidze) of Kutaisi-Gaenati, with instructions to tonsure him a monk and ordain him to the priesthood. Patriarch Melchizedek wanted to ensure that Vasiko become not just a monk, which is what the young man steadfastly wished, but also a priest. That year, at age twenty-six, Vasiko was tonsured a monk with the name Gabriel, in honor of the Athonite saint who received the Iveron Icon of the Mother of God from the sea.

Soon he was ordained a hierodeacon, and then a hieromonk. Fr.

¹² The Sioni Cathedral of the Dormition in Tbilisi, named after Mount Zion at Jerusalem. First built in the sixth century, the cathedral was destroyed by foreign invaders—Arabs, Persians, and Mongol Tatars—and rebuilt several times. It was the patriarchal cathedral until 2004, when the new Holy Trinity Cathedral was built.

¹³ Patriarch of Georgia from 1952 until his death in 1960.



The Sioni Cathedral in Tbilisi.

Gabriel served in the diocesan cathedral of Sts. Peter and Paul, but after three months he had to leave. He never revealed the reason for this except to His Holiness Melchizedek, but the reason was apparently compelling. The patriarch returned him to the Sioni Cathedral.

Fr. Gabriel and Patriarch Melchizedek were very close. The patriarch understood and valued Fr. Gabriel's uncompromising faithfulness to God and the Church, and therefore when other priests began slandering Fr. Gabriel he paid them little heed. He even warned Fr. Gabriel after the first case of slander that there would be many such cases, and so there were until Fr. Gabriel moved back to Betania in 1960. We can only suppose that his brother clergymen were jealous of him, that their consciences were pricked by his living example, or that they were close with the Soviet authorities, who never ceased to keep vigilant watch over his life.

4. RETURN TO BETANIA

By this time, Elder John had reposed in the Lord (in 1957) and Elder George was very weak. Fr. Gabriel was the only other monk, and had to do all the work around the monastery. The labor was difficult, exhausting the young hieromonk. But Elder George was also not long for this earth. He and Fr. Gabriel were so spiritually close that, when the elder was near death and Fr. Gabriel was fulfilling his duty of serving at another church, Fr. George prayed to the Mother of God to send Fr. Gabriel back to his bedside. Fr. Gabriel heard a voice telling him to return quickly to Betania. Although the elder had been hospitalized and released, he had been in a tolerably healthy condition when Fr. Gabriel had left him. He did not know that Fr. George's death was approaching until he returned. Fr. George reposed in the Lord while in Fr. Gabriel's arms, but only after revealing to him that he would have to go through many sorrows in this life, and that he should have no fear, for the Lord would give him strength to bear them.

Danger was already hanging over Betania, but Fr. Gabriel was there to serve the fortieth-day memorial service after his elder's repose. On that very day, the authorities came and threw him out of the monastery. He returned to Tbilisi, where he served in the Holy Trinity



Fr. Gabriel not long after his ordination to the priesthood.

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Church. As for his beloved elders, Fr. Gabriel would lobby until his death for their canonization, for few knew of their sanctity as well as he.

5. RECLUSION IN TBILISI

With tears will I water my couch (Ps. 6:7).

In Tbilisi Fr. Gabriel fulfilled his inner compulsion to build churches. He constructed one with his own hands in his family's back yard. In fact, it was more than a church; it was a little monastery, with five rooms—three reception rooms, a tiny cell, and a small chapel. Fr. Gabriel would at times shut himself up in this little monastery, and only the Lord knew of his ascetic labors. He ate so little that his family would be alarmed. Even more alarming was the sound of his spiritual lamentations: endless weeping over something they could not understand. Once, after he had not emerged for a long time or answered anyone's calls, his older brother decided to break down the door of his dwelling. But no sooner had he lifted the axe when Fr. Gabriel opened the door and told him sternly to desist.

Toward the end of his life, Fr. Gabriel spoke a little about this period of lamentation. There was one incident about which he had to let people know. He had been asked to lead a supplicatory prayer service to the Mother of God for the increase of the Georgian people. That night, after the service, he had a vision: a large white house, and inside it an avalanche of infant bodies and body parts. The Mother of God summoned him and told him with great sternness that he was to be praying to her to increase the Georgian population, while the people were having abortions.

Elder Gabriel's great love poured out intensely for his people, the Georgians. How sorrowful it was for him to see his Christian people in a state of apostasy, even if this apostasy was out of fear. For him, the beautiful Georgian land was all he needed—it was his Jerusalem, his

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Athos, his paradise. Georgia—Iberia—is the portion that the Mother of God received from God. She was to bring the light of her Son to it, and she delegated this task to the great Equal-to-the-Apostles Nino. And so Christ's servant Gabriel, born according to His Providence in the land of Georgia, prayed and wept for it continually.

6. THE DAY THE FIRE CAME DOWN

*I have been very jealous for the
Lord Almighty (III Kings 19:10).*

It was May 1, 1965, the day that everywhere in the Soviet Union people celebrated International Workers' Day—a quintessentially Communist holiday. Although the party officials on the tribunal and the people celebrating in the square paid scant heed, it was also Great and Holy Saturday. Fr. Gabriel had just served the Liturgy and was walking to another church when he saw, as part of the celebration, a twenty-six by sixteen-and-a-half foot portrait of Lenin on the façade of the Union of Ministers building, illuminated all around with electric lamps. Above the portrait was the banner, "Glory to Great Lenin!" The Party members were standing on the tribunal, and everywhere there was music and shouting—a scene reminiscent of Nebuchadnezzar's "every kind of music" that would play before all were to bow down before the idol in Babylon (cf. Dan. chap. 3).

Fr. Gabriel's love of God could not countenance the godlessness of this spectacle. He went to the church, and brought back a flask of kerosene and some matches to the Union of Ministers building. Strangely unnoticed by the guards, he walked right over to the portrait behind the tribunal, poured kerosene over it, and set it alight. The kerosene, combined with the oil paint, ensured an instant conflagration, which caused the lamps to burst, making people think it was an act of sabotage and throwing them into a panic. But when they saw by the tribunal only a priest in a black cassock they quieted down. Then Fr. Gabriel

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stretched out his arms and shouted, *Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth* (Ex. 20:4). The crowd became enraged and threw themselves at Fr. Gabriel, beating him almost to death, as he continued, "Glory is due not to this corpse, but to Jesus Christ, Who trampled down death and gave us eternal life!" Then he fell silent. Had it not been for the police who intervened, this would have been the end of the saint's earthly life.

Before setting fire to the Soviet idol, Fr. Gabriel was fully conscious of the ramifications of this act. He knew that this could mean his death, but he was prepared to die. He would have suffered much less had he died then and there, because a terrible ordeal now began for him that would mark an entirely new phase of his life.

In the prison he was interrogated, beaten, and tortured on a daily basis. The authorities tried first to make him publicly confess that the Church had put him up to this act. Of course, Fr. Gabriel refused, despite the tortures. Then they told him that if he would make a public apology and say that had performed this reprehensible act of sacrilege against the Soviet leader under the corrupting influence of the Christian religion, then they would not execute him. This he also refused to do. He later said of the tortures applied to him in order to bend his strong will: "Human nature could not bear those horrors if it were not for God's help."

Fr. Gabriel called out in silent prayer to the Lord for strength to bear it all, and finally, he had a vision: a bright, shining number seven. He inwardly understood this vision to mean that he would be released in seven months; and truly, this would be the breaking point in his ordeal. As he said later, fear soon fell upon everyone, and some of his torturers even came to ask his forgiveness.

Soon Fr. Gabriel was moved out of isolation and into a cell with other prisoners. These hardened criminals were supposed to make his life even more miserable, but instead they grew to respect him and guarded him from troubles. Even the most desperate were so taken by

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the humble hieromonk that they would say, “We have such an amazing man here in prison that we don’t even want to leave.”

The interrogations, however, continued. Unable to break Fr. Gabriel, the authorities would have simply executed him. But the incident had leaked to the Western press, and they were now in a delicate predicament. Instead of killing him they put him in a psychiatric hospital, calling him crazy, with the intention of actually driving him insane and silencing him forever. Fr. Gabriel recalled his time in the psychiatric hospital as even worse than prison. Beatings continued by hospital personnel, and he was put into rooms with violent patients. Drugs were administered with the intention of injuring his nervous system, but even under these circumstance the Lord gave him the wisdom to foil those plans. Finally, a friend of Catholicos-Patriarch Ephraim II of Georgia,¹⁴ the famous medical scientist and deeply believing Orthodox Christian Avlipia Zurabashvili, was able, through his high connections, to influence the situation and have Fr. Gabriel released; although the authorities had intended to keep him locked up in the psychiatric hospital for the rest of his life. This happened seven months after the vision he had of the number seven.

The “doctors” released him with a diagnosis of “psychopathic personality, with a predisposition towards psychopathic outbursts of a schizophrenic character.” They referred back to the documentation given after his discharge from the army. “At age twelve, he imagined he saw an evil spirit, with horns on his head.... The patient insists that the evil one is responsible for everything bad that happens in the world....” His religious outlook was taken not only as the cause of his “psychopathy” but as the psychopathy itself. “He believes in the existence of heavenly life, God, angels, etc. The psychopath’s main axis of conversation is directed at the belief that everything happens according to God’s will, etc.... Whenever anyone tries to talk to him, he always recalls God, angels, icons, etc....”

¹⁴ Patriarch of Georgia from 1960 until his death in 1972.

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Fr. Gabriel's spiritual strength, humility, and hope in the Lord, which carried him through this dreadful ordeal, were interpreted as madness. As we read in the writings of ancient Holy Fathers, we can see that such a turn of events in Christian countries was foreseen long ago—that there would come a time when the world would be entirely insane from the Christian point of view, and that those who hold to their Christian beliefs would be called crazy.¹⁵ This came true quite literally in the life of St. Gabriel.

Concerning the horrible ordeal that the Lord allowed Fr. Gabriel to experience in order to strengthen his faith and bring him through the furnace of purification, Fr. Gabriel later said in conclusion: "Faith is rooted in us through piety and the endurance of trials, and if it does not give birth in you to a spirit of faithfulness and self-sacrifice in the name of Christ, then know that you are still far from true, divine faith." And as he told Fr. Gerasim, the author of the article in the 1992 issue of *The Orthodox Word*, "I am a pastor and I was entrusted by God to care for His sheep. They erected an idol and wanted to make the people bow down before this idol. This is a type of the Antichrist, an image of a man, or rather of a beast, and they [the Communists] wanted to give him the honor that belongs to God alone. I could not allow this to continue."¹⁶

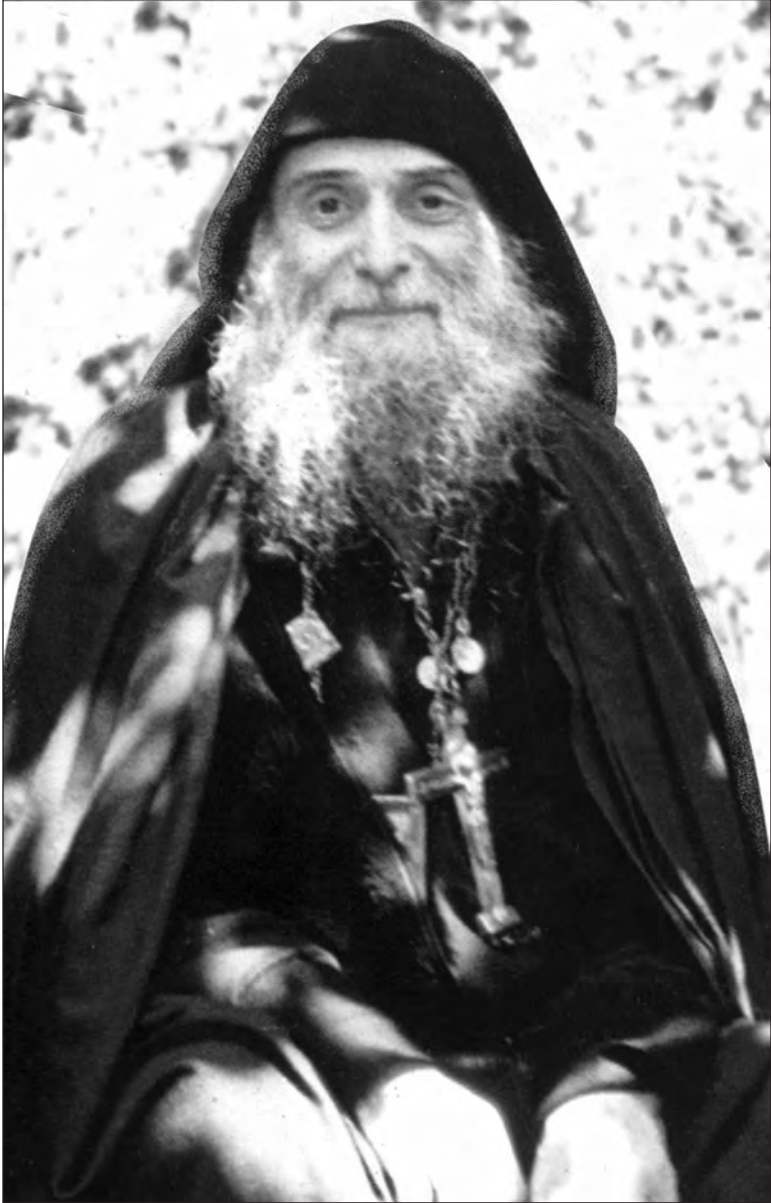
7. FOOLISHNESS-FOR-CHRIST

*It pleased God by the foolishness of preaching
to save them that believe (I Cor. 1:21).*

After Fr. Gabriel was released from the psychiatric hospital he returned to his "handmade monastery," and his period of foolishness-for-Christ began, or rather, ripened. Foolishness-for-Christ is the supreme ascetic labor, the ultimate renunciation. A servant of God, to whom divine

¹⁵ Cf. St. Anthony the Great in *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, trans. Benedicta Ward (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian Publications, 1975), p. 6.

¹⁶ Monk Gerasim (Eliel), "Father Gabriel and the Last Georgian Elders," p. 239.



A popular photograph of Elder Gabriel.

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things have been revealed and who cares for nothing in this world, only for God, veils himself in madness to cover his gifts and to sink himself into deep humility, so that all glory and honor would be rendered to God, while the man himself is derided. Especially enabling such a feat was the fact that the Soviet authorities demanded as a condition for his release that the patriarch suspend Fr. Gabriel from serving in church in any capacity. They thought to stop the flow of God's grace through His chosen one through administrative means; however, the river of living water found another channel of expression in Fr. Gabriel's foolishness-for-Christ.

Through acts that were confusing to those looking to find a venerable monk, Fr. Gabriel nevertheless had the divine wisdom to show his love and care for human souls. His external spiritual rule disappeared completely—it had become entirely internal, and even more rigorous. Fr. Gabriel appeared mentally ill, and there were even documents to prove it. He was under constant suspicion by the authorities. This in fact caused even many religious people to keep their distance and consider him crazy, and somewhat of a pariah. But when necessary, through his feigned madness he would reach out to a person's inner self and save him from spiritual harm.

For example, one day Fr. Gabriel was standing outside his cell, gazing up at his monastery. In his hands were a full wine-bottle and a glass. As he reeled tipsily, a group of young people were walking by with the intention of visiting his holy place. Fr. Gabriel poured himself a glass and made a toast, then drank the glass to the bottom. He continued toasting and drinking, and each one heard the toasts in a different way—apparently his words were reaching each one as needed. One young man was scandalized and looked at the elder angrily. As the group walked on, Fr. Gabriel called that young man over. The young man walked cautiously up the stairs. When they met, Fr. Gabriel's countenance completely changed, returning to his true self. He poured him a glass, and looking at him very seriously said, "Have a drink, my dear one!" To this man's great surprise, he tasted in the glass

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not wine but cherry juice mixed with water. “Don’t judge any of God’s creations,” said the elder. “If I start judging you and consider that I’m better than you, I’ll be abominable before the Lord. Remember this, my dear one, and go in peace.”

In the early period of his foolishness, Fr. Gabriel would often walk around the city of Tbilisi barefoot, dressed in rags, and with a metal scrub brush on his head. This gave passers-by great amusement, and they would laugh at him and scorn him. His teaching would later explain such actions as a means of humbling himself. Once, he explained to his spiritual children how terrible arrogance is and how important humility is: “When it seemed to me that I was an important person or that I was better than others, I would act that way [foolishly]; and when people would laugh at me I’d be humbled and see that I’m garbage.” Meanwhile, the saint would continue to preach about God on the streets.

These were also years of severe asceticism—eating extremely small amounts of food, praying with copious tears, and at times having no place to lay his head. It was a time of completely subjecting his flesh to the spirit and rooting out the passions. He ate only dried bread and water, and that only once a day. He wore heavy chains on his body. He never slept lying down, but only lightly on a stool, or in his cell-church, or in a pit he had dug for himself. He would wail with soulful lamentations in his cell, frightening his family members, especially his mother. Meanwhile, the Soviet authorities did not leave him alone—they summoned him to police headquarters periodically to scare him into submission, but always in vain.

This period of persecution compelled him to leave the cell in his family’s yard and go to live in a cemetery, among the graves. People would leave him something to eat there, and that was how he sustained himself. He continued attending Church services, and humbly received Communion outside the altar, with the lay congregation. But a time would come when even this consolation, and the consolation of his spiritual refuge—the little monastery in his family’s yard—would be taken away from him.

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It is difficult to imagine how dear this cell-church was to Fr. Gabriel. He had built it lovingly with his own hands, and gathered the multitude of icons within it from the city dump. In those days, many had lost their respect for holy icons, and were afraid to have them in their homes—they would throw them away. Fr. Gabriel would spend hours rifling through the refuse to retrieve them. He even paid other scavengers to find them for him. He would scrupulously clean them and hang them in his cell-church.¹⁷

Only God knows what fervent prayer was poured out during the days and months that Fr. Gabriel spent in his cell, shut away from the world, in the middle of Georgia's capital city. And only God knows just what this place of repentance meant to His servant. But the enemy of mankind's happiness was jealous of any bridge from man to God, and put in the minds of the authorities to destroy it. They came to Patriarch Ephraim II and said, "He's your priest, and you have to take care of it!" Thus was the patriarch pressured to have the church destroyed. When Fr. Gabriel came that evening to the services, the patriarch called him into the altar and said, "The government is very angry about your church and demands that it be demolished. These are bad times, and we can't struggle against them; you'd better tear down your church. When times change you can rebuild it."

"I won't do it," came his reply. "If you let the atheists have their way, they'll demand that you remove the cross from your chest. How can I destroy what I built to the glory of God?!" But the elder could see what a predicament the patriarch was in, and after some other strong words were exchanged he finally told him he would do it.

When the patriarch came to his home together with the local authorities, Fr. Gabriel began tearing down the building. When the delegation left satisfied, he stopped, after having torn down only the

¹⁷ Some of these icons were old and valuable—these he decided to give to the patriarch, keeping only the poorer ones.

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first two reception rooms, leaving the cell and the church intact. A few days later, he rebuilt the two rooms, only smaller. The authorities saw this and again pressured the patriarch, who called Fr. Gabriel on the carpet.

“I told you to tear it down!” he said.

“I tore down what I did,” Fr. Gabriel replied, “because you were there. Those were bad times. But then a few days passed and the time came to rebuild, and I rebuilt. What could I do? How could I destroy what I built to the glory of God?”

For that answer, the patriarch excommunicated him. Fr. Gabriel often visited Samtavro Convent at that time, and the sisters recalled how hard it was for him. He was a complete outcast, who was being forced to part with his last earthly refuge.

The day came when the local Party secretary sent some workers to tear down the cell-church. His own sister recalls him standing on the balcony of their home and watching the destruction, but he was strangely calm. “Don’t worry, sister. Today they rejoice, but tomorrow they’ll sorrow. Today I sorrow, but tomorrow I’ll rejoice.” The demolition crew left, loading the building materials onto their truck. But for whatever reason, they didn’t take it to the dump, but rather dropped it in a city square two miles away. The next morning, Fr. Gabriel went to the square, hired a vehicle, and brought it all back. He told his sister that he would now rebuild his church. At her protest that he might get in big trouble for this, he answered, “They’ve done what God allowed them to do! They can’t destroy anything more!”

Amazingly, the local Party secretary returned to Fr. Gabriel’s house, but instead of anger, she showed remorse for what she had done. She even offered money to rebuild the church, but the elder refused. Nevertheless, he found the means to rebuild—and he rebuilt. His church stands today, and is a place of pilgrimage.



St. Gabriel's cell-church as it now looks. Photograph from 2013.

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8. SAMTAVRO

*I have chosen rather to be an outcast
in the house of my God ... (Ps. 83:11).*

During his period of excommunication Fr. Gabriel hoped only in the Lord, because the patriarch would not change his mind. But one night the elder had a vision. "I saw that I was standing at the place where the Robe of Christ was buried. It was morning, and the patriarch would soon come. All the clergy gathered to meet him. The bells could be heard, and the patriarch entered the church.... He entered the altar.... Suddenly, as all were quiet, the Savior Himself and the Most Pure Mother of God entered. They came up to me, told me to go through the royal doors to the altar, and placed me before the holy table. Then the Savior looked at the patriarch, motioned to me with His hand, and said, 'I will only accept the sacrifice from him.' I awoke, and my soul, consoled by the vision, was in a blessed state. I felt hope that something would change for the better."

He considered the vision to mean only that the patriarch would release him from the excommunication, and so he prepared himself for Holy Communion. In his humility it didn't occur to him that his priesthood would also be returned. But the next morning when he saw the patriarch, who had an agitated countenance that made Fr. Gabriel believe that he had also seen something supernatural, he was asked to vest in priestly robes and serve the Liturgy. Moreover, after the service Patriarch Ephraim II appointed him priest of the seminary and convent in Samtavro.¹⁸ The head of the seminary at that time was Metropolitan Ilia, now Catholicos-Patriarch of Georgia. Fr. Gabriel was given a cell in one of the monastery towers. This great change happened on October 14, 1971. After five years of persecution, Fr. Gabriel lived a peaceful

¹⁸ The seminary at that time was located on the grounds of the Samtavro Convent.



The Transfiguration Church of the Samtavro Convent.

life in Samtavro for one year—until Patriarch Ephraim died and Patriarch David V was elected.¹⁹ At that time he was removed from this position, as was Metropolitan Ilia from his.

From 1972 to 1990, Fr. Gabriel lived mostly in his cell-church, coming to Samtavro periodically. In 1987, he lived in a board hut—an abandoned henhouse—on the grounds of the Samtavro Convent. It afforded very little comfort, but he bore this also with humility. He was often judged for this; people did not see it as asceticism but simply as stupidity. This was a period of very severe ascetic labors for Fr. Gabriel; he would at times lock himself in his cell with bread and water, and not emerge for months. When he did, he continued his foolishness-for-Christ.

¹⁹ Patriarch of Georgia from 1972 until his death in 1977. His time as patriarch was controversial, as he was seen as overly loyal to the Soviet government.

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In 1990 Fr. Gabriel decided to go to the monastery of St. Shio Mgvime²⁰ for complete reclusion. However, after one week there, the Lord appeared to him and told him to return to Samtavro to serve people. To the nuns of Samtavro he was a great elder and loving father, bringing them up in obedience and love. When the respected Samtavro abbess Anna (Achidze) was near death, she asked the sisters to take her to Fr. Gabriel for her final Confession, and would go to no one else. After her death the convent was without an abbess for a period of time. The elder foresaw who would eventually take her place; the current abbess, Ketevan (Kopaliani), recalled how he revealed this to her:

“One evening, Fr. Gabriel closed the doors to the refectory after dinner and would not let any of the sisters leave. I was Ryassaphore-nun Nino at the time. Fr. Gabriel told me to bring a basin and help all the nuns wash their hands. I nodded, immediately fulfilled the elder’s blessing, and brought him the basin of water used to wash the sisters’ hands. He looked at me searchingly and said, ‘Drink this vessel to the end!’ ‘All of it?’ I asked, surprised. ‘To the end!’ came the answer. I had no time to think. Fr. Gabriel’s word seemed unwavering to me. I quickly drank it. The elder pressed me to his heart and blessed me lovingly.”

Soon Nino was tonsured a nun with the name Ketevan, and very little time passed before His Holiness Patriarch Ilia II appointed her abbess of the convent.

Fr. Gabriel himself was a very strict faster, but he did not require the same of his spiritual children—only according to their strength. Because his ascetic labors were hidden from the world behind closed doors, or behind the cloak of foolishness, some might have thought it possible to imitate him, not taking into consideration that Fr. Gabriel was a chosen vessel of God, Who strengthened the elder in all that he did for His sake. Fr. Gabriel’s cell attendant at Samtavro, Mother Parasceva, saw how little he ate even when he was very ill—he took only a

²⁰ Founded near Mtskheta in the sixth century by St. Shio, a Syrian monk who came to Georgia to missionize that country. The monastery was closed by the Communists, and in 1990 there were no monks living in it.

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couple spoonfuls of soup twice a week, and never ate on Wednesdays and Fridays. There were times when he would eat nothing for as many as three weeks, only taking a gulp of water once every two or three days. At one time, Mother Parasceva had the desire to imitate his self-restraint in food, but quickly lost strength. Fr. Gabriel saw what she was doing and told her not to try it. "Since childhood my stomach has not known satiety," he said. "But you need to eat." Six months before his death he refused even the bread with the soup, and a month before death he refused all forms of food, drinking only water, in the same tiny amounts as before.

9. FINAL DAYS

I have finished my course, I have kept the faith (II Tim. 4:7).

In 1995 Fr. Gabriel was raised to the rank of archimandrite. The patriarch made this announcement in the church, and then went to tell Fr. Gabriel, who was very ill by then and lay in his cell. "I am not worthy of that honor," Fr. Gabriel said humbly. "That's not for you to decide. We've sung 'Axios'²¹ and you're now an archimandrite," and with those words he placed an archimandrite's cross on Fr. Gabriel's chest.

This was the day that Fr. Gabriel was finally healed of a long bout of dropsy. He asked that a new cell be built for him, and after it was completed he moved there. It seemed to many that his move to a new cell presaged a new theme in his preaching—whereas before he had spoken mostly of love of God and neighbor, repentance, and kindness, he now spoke of the last times. "I know that since apostolic times it has been said that the time is near. But believe me—and I will answer at the Last Judgment of Christ for these words—that truly the end is near!"

The time was approaching when Fr. Gabriel would depart to the

²¹ *Axios*: "worthy" (Greek), sung at ordinations and elevations of clergy.—ED.

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throne of God. “I will leave soon,” he would say. “I must leave.” One day, when numerous priests, bishops, and pilgrims had come to Samtavro for its patronal feast, Fr. Gabriel asked that his coffin—he had been lying down from time to time in a coffin for a number of years—be brought outside his cell. There, in front of everyone, he lay down in his coffin as if to bid all farewell. “Not many days will pass and you will see Monk Gabriel in this state. I take with me love for everyone, for the Orthodox people, and for each person.”

Then his foolishness stopped.

Fr. Gabriel asked to be buried wrapped only in a rough shroud, and that his coffin be left to his mother. His spiritual children recall that there was a time at the end of his life when his mother Barbara came to visit him and wept. “Your whole life has been nothing but suffering and pain!” She still felt that it could all have been different, if only he had not chosen the path of living only for Christ. This too was painful for the elder, because he said to her, “You still don’t understand me. I could not live any other way.” After her son’s repose, Barbara also received the monastic tonsure, and soon thereafter lay down forever in his coffin.

The last words he was able to utter before silence overtook him were: “I have been following Thee from the age of twelve, Lord, and now I am ready. Take me to Thyself.” As he lay silent, all the sisters and everyone who knew him came to say good-bye. That evening Archbishop Daniel (Datuashvili) of Sukhumi and Abkhazia came to read the Canon for the Departure of the Soul at Fr. Gabriel’s bedside. When the final words had been read, Fr. Gabriel smiled joyfully, and gave up his spirit. It was October 20/November 2, 1995.

Archimandrite Gabriel (Urgebadze) was glorified as a saint on December 20, 2012, at a session of the Holy Synod of the Georgian Orthodox Church. His memory is celebrated on October 20/November 2. His incorrupt relics were uncovered on February 22, 2014, and now repose in the Holy Transfiguration Church of the Samtavro Convent in Mtskheta.



Elder Gabriel (front row, just left of center) with Catholicos-Patriarch Ilia II (to the right of him, in overcoat), along with Georgian hierarchs and clergy.

10. FR. GABRIEL'S LAST WILL AND TESTAMENT

Glory to Christ God!

From His Holiness and Beatitude Catholicos-Patriarch Ilia II of Georgia I ask forgiveness and conciliation. I leave my blessing and forgiveness-conciliation to all the clerical and monastic ranks. God is Love, but although I tried very hard, I was not able to attain love of God and neighbor according to the Lord's commandments. Man's whole acquisition of the Kingdom of Heaven consists in love—while in this visible world and in his eternal inheritance (eternal life). Bury me without a coffin, in my mantia.²² Be kind and humble. The Lord has remembered us in our humility, for humility gives us grace. Abide with humility, kindness, and love before every person born of God. I take my love for all with me—for Orthodox people and for every person born of

²² *Mantia*: a mantle; the pleated, sleeveless outer garment worn by tonsured monks and nuns.—ED.

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God. The Goal of life and of this entire visible world is the acquisition of the Kingdom of Heaven, drawing closer to God, and receiving the inheritance of eternal life. I wish this also for all of you. I leave you with my blessing; may no one lose the great mercy of God, and may all be vouchsafed to attain the Kingdom. There is no man who lives and does not sin. I alone am a great sinner, completely unworthy, and exceedingly infirm. From all my love I beg you all who may pass by my grave to ask forgiveness for me, a sinner. I was dust, and I return to dust.

The truth is in the immortality of the soul.

—Monk Gabriel

II. SELECTED TEACHINGS OF ST. GABRIEL (URGEBADZE)

Although St. Gabriel was canonized as a fool-for-Christ, he was also glorified as a monastic saint and a holy father of the Church. Dismissed during his lifetime by many as mentally unstable or a fool, his words show quite clearly that he was deeply learned in the art and science of Orthodox Christian spiritual life, from personal experience and wisdom, from his monastic instructors, but also from extensive reading of Holy Scripture and patristic texts.

On Nationalism and Love of One's Fatherland

God! Truth! This is supreme over one's fatherland, but one's fatherland is also from God; and truth lies also in devoted love for your native people. All people in the world are family before Christ; and so I ask you: What place is there for hatred for other nations?! No, there is only love. But if you do not love your own people with filial love, how will you love another people?! And another thing: there exists between parents and children a special, grace-filled interdependence—a divine responsibility. Could it be that the Apostle Paul had no love for his own people, having preached to all manner of pagans and converted them all, but in his own prayers consigns himself to hell and separation [from God] if only his people [the Jews] could be saved (cf. Rom. 9:3)?

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On Love and Humility

Be humble and loving before all people, and if you cannot love everyone, at least treat everyone with good will. Kindness will open to you the gates of Paradise, humility will lead you there, and love will reveal God to you. God is seen only in truth and divine love, for “God is Love.”

Remember and understand me well: without Christ, all is nothing! Man is created in the image of Christ, and if we who are His likeness do not come to Him, we will perish! *If ye believe not that I am He, ye shall die in your sins* (John 8:24).

On Divine Love and Human Love

I have heard some people say, “Ah! Human love is useless,” which is a great error. Human love is useless and barren only when it excludes divine love and does not strive for it. Is anyone directly given divine love; or who can determine its bounds? Love can and must be learned. It begins in us from earliest childhood, and if we progress well in it, then by God’s mercy and grace we will be vouchsafed divine love also. Man is endowed with the talent of love as a gift, and if we sincerely preserve within ourselves the paths that lead to it, this talent will grow into fruit. The true transformation of human love is divine love. Human love begins, divine love completes.

Doing deeds with love is a great talent. Without works, faith, as well as prayer, is dead. Deeds done with love cover a multitude of sins. The five foolish virgins lacked deeds performed with love, and therefore they were deprived of the grace of the Holy Spirit, and through grace—enlightenment, purification, and illumination with even more love.

The love of the Lord is hidden from those who are inexperienced in serving God, for if He were to show us fully how much He loves us it would be to our detriment. We would forget about fear and reverence

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Elder Gabriel toward the end of his life.

before Him; and being willful, we would turn the freedom given to us for spiritual progress into failure. Therefore the Lord allows temptations to come upon us, so that we would be tested and learn, and attain greater progress. For if temptation increases, God's grace also increases.

How can we learn to love? The Lord shows us other people's tragedies in order to teach us: Do not be indifferent to your neighbor's pain. If you can help him, do so; if you can't do anything to help, you can in any case have compassion. Pray for him. Prayer raised with love has great power. By this we exercise ourselves in love and learn to love.

Some people say that love abides in them, but they don't even know what love is. Or who can fathom it? *Love suffereth long, and is kind; love envieth not; love vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up, doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no*

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evil; rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth; beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things (I Cor. 13:4-7).

If you have contempt for even one person, you are far from the Kingdom of Heaven. Love is the mother of all virtues. The heart belongs first and foremost to the One Who gave it to you—*This is the first and great commandment* (Matt. 22:38).

On the Divine Liturgy

If you could see what grace descends during the Liturgy in church, you would gather the dust and wash your face with it.

On Judging

I am a great sinner and greatly infirm. If you see a person sinning even at the hour of his death, do not judge him. Judging and mockery are great wounds on the soul. The Lord says, “Man, who art thou that thou shouldst judge for Me?” *For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged; and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again* (Matt. 7:2). Judging is a manifestation of human stupidity; it shows that he who judges does not yet know God or himself as he should.

Judging is a great sin, when we exalt ourselves above others. All who exalt themselves are abominable before the Lord. *Whosoever shall exalt himself shall be abased; and he that shall humble himself shall be exalted* (Matt. 23:12). When you judge others you judge God. Whether you’ve seen a thief, a loose woman, or a drunkard sprawled on the street, do not judge, because the Lord allowed their passions. Through these they should find the path to God—they should be humbled, see their own powerlessness, come to know the Lord, and repent. And are you pleasing to God? That means that the Lord in His grace and mercy is restraining your passions. Know that if He lets them go you will fall into worse sins, and perhaps you won’t manage to climb out of those sins and you’ll perish. Therefore be humble and cautious. You saw that

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a person sinned, but did you see how he later repented? Then don't judge! Like a thread passing through the eye of a needle, so man experiences the same sin that he judged in another.

On Confession

Every sin is enmity with God! Aren't you afraid to be enemies with Him?! Once you have committed a sin, do not carry it on your back for a long time; it hangs over your life like a death-dealing sword. Go speedily to a priest and repent. There the Lord Himself, Who forgives sins and is merciful, will forgive you your sins through the mediation of His servant. Woe to him who does not understand the mystery of Confession. After all, it is God's saving mercy sent down to man by God.

Repentance of a sin, its forgiveness at Confession, and its departure from us in the future must not weaken our feeling of our own unworthiness. If I am not sinful it means I'm holy; if I haven't committed sin it means I'm righteous—but this reveals my falseness before Christ, because I only know one sinless, holy, and righteous Man, and that is the Lord Jesus, Whose blood redeemed us. There are none holy on earth; holiness is only in heaven. If someone lives a God-pleasing and pure life, we should say that he lives purely, because no one is completely safe from sins and falls.

On Sanctification

Before the fall, Adam saw both the physical and the spiritual worlds, from which, though the vision of the Lord's heavenly mansions, the wisdom and greatness of God could be seen more powerfully than anything. Adam saw them before the fall, and after the fall this vision was hidden from him and from all mankind and became "unknown." It was given to us to behold, but it was taken away. Sin, disobedience, departure from God's word deprived us of the ability to see Him; and to whomever the vision of the "unknown" has been restored, that person

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has received it by God's mercy for his particular holiness and virtuous life.

This means, as you see, how necessary holiness is, so that a person might be again made worthy of seeing the "unknown" that has been taken and confiscated from us—the magnificent part of God's wondrous wisdom, which is perceived and tangible through vision.

On Love and Theosis

Everything is beautiful and divine in [the book by] St. John of Sinai,²³ which so impressively describes the steps of man's spiritual perfection; but it only lacks one, final state, which is the gift of God, the crown and perfection of all things—it is called love and theosis.

Here is love—love, and nothing else. A person completely and inseparably abides with God, and this is complete unity. A person's mind stops, thoughts completely disappear from his mind; he thinks of nothing more, only contemplates God and does and says only what he sees and hears from God. Theosis possesses wisdom from the beginning to the end of the ages.

12. TESTIMONIES

Nun Parasceva, Fr. Gabriel's cell-attendant at the end of his life in Samtavro, was probably the first to witness miracles worked by the saint. Because this humble nun played such an important role in the saint's later life and after his death, we submit here her own account of how she came to serve Fr. Gabriel:

I was born in Dusheti, an entirely unremarkable place. My parents worked at the school: Papa was the principal, and Mama taught history. At the end of her life she became a nun with the name Matriona and was buried at the Samtavro Convent.

²³ I.e., *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*.

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At age sixteen I was already sure that I wanted to dedicate my life to God, but I didn't know how to do it. After all, in those days there were no service books at all. One day a book about St. Anthony the Great fell into my hands. After reading it, I understood how monks should live and pray. But these rules seemed very difficult or impossible to fulfill.

In despair I began to call on the Mother of God for help, turning to her Iveron icon and saying, "Mother of God, Most Holy Theotokos, I want so badly to be a nun. But the rules are so hard that I'm afraid I won't be able to do it. What should I do? I don't know. Tell me what to do, help me, teach me." I prayed this way for a long time, and suddenly, to my terror, I saw that the icon as if came to life and the Most Pure One herself came out of the icon and said, "Your path leads to the monastery. Go, and have no fear. I myself will help you." After these words the miraculous vision ended.

Some time later I set out for Samtavro Convent, learned the rules of the monastery, and started living in the world like a nun. After finishing school I worked at an electrical appliances factory, went to church, and lived an ordinary life like everyone else—but no one knew that in secret I prayed the monastic rule.

I always had the presentiment that I would be taking care of someone. That is what later happened.

When I reached the age of thirty-five, I finally resolved to go to a monastery. I came to Samtavro and stayed. There I met the elder. I often saw how Fr. Gabriel would sit on the steps and bless people. There was always a huge number of people around him. Simple people, bishops, even His Holiness [the Patriarch of Georgia] came to him. Once, I came to the elder and told him about the appearance of the Mother of God. At first he didn't believe it and asked me to describe what happened in detail. Then he said that it was from God.

Soon I was tonsured a ryassaphore-nun with the name Serafima. My obedience was to herd the cows, which I did with great



Nun Parasceva (Rostiashvili), who was Elder Gabriel's cell-attendant during the last part of his life.

pleasure. Fr. Gabriel was undoubtedly a clairvoyant man. Several times he smiled, looked at me, and said, "I need a Friday...." You know, Parasceva means Friday. But then I didn't understand him and wondered why he was talking about some sort of Friday. Then, during my tonsure into the mantia with the name Parasceva, Father came to me, placed a prayer rope in my hands, and said, "I bless you with this prayer rope. See that you don't lose it. I'll recognize you by it when you come to the Lord."

So, I tended the cows. Meanwhile, I would look for Fr. Gabriel. I was always drawn to him, always wanted to be near him. At that time his health was beginning to decline. I would run to him and ask him if he needed anything. I would straighten his pillow, bring him water, or tidy up. Then I had a strange dream. It was as if the Lord were saying to me, "Just as you take care of those animals, that

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is how you will take care of My saint.” I was very surprised. What could it mean? And I didn’t tell anyone about it.

Fr. Gabriel continued to be ill. One day, Bishop Daniel (Datushvili) came to the monastery. After talking with the ailing elder he said that he needed to be nursed. Then the abbess decided that since I went so often to the elder, it should be my obedience. You wouldn’t believe how happy I was. After all, before this I had done it all secretly, and now I wouldn’t have to hide it! I ran immediately to Fr. Gabriel and told him about the abbess’s decision, and also told him about my dream. He heard me attentively, then asked if I had told the abbess about this. When he heard that I hadn’t he was sad. He said, “You should have told her. That dream was from God.”

That’s how I began my service to Fr. Gabriel, and it went on to the day he died.

Metropolitan Seraphim (Jojua) of Borjomi and Bakuriani was a spiritual son of Fr. Gabriel. He talks about his experience of him:

When I saw Fr. Gabriel for the first time, I thought, “This is a chosen one of God.” This could be felt in everything he did.

The elder never remained indifferent to other people’s woes, and he could console the offended and suffering for hours. Seeing people’s deep sorrow and unhappiness, he would start sobbing and praying fervently for them. He said, “If we help each other, then God will be merciful to us. He has given us an opportunity to do a good deed.”

Fr. Gabriel was able to feel any kind of falsity and insincerity in people. He gave the vainglorious tough lessons in humility, but this would be good for them. It would happen that during a festive meal or gathering of priests he would begin running around with his arms raised, shouting, “Vainglory! Vainglory!”

He often showed foolishness-for-Christ, and could do the oddest things. Sometimes he would scold using terrible, simply indecent

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words. Or, just imagine—he did somersaults in church during the Liturgy, rolling around the floor. It was a scandal to many; they didn't understand what was going on.

Well, one day my friend, a good artist—he was very young then— stood with his friends at the gates of Samtavro, and they were discussing how Fr. Gabriel did somersaults during the Liturgy. There were five or six of them. They said amongst themselves, “Well, we know that he's a saint, but the others don't know this. What do they think? There are limits. How can he do it? The Liturgy is going on, the Bloodless Sacrifice is being offered, and he's at the ambo doing God knows what.” Then suddenly a taxi stops. The elder gets out and walks right up to them. They're standing in a circle. He thrusts his head in and says, “Well, are you judging me?” They were stunned and didn't know what to do. Then the elder calmly walked on.

... I'm very grateful to the Lord for vouchsafing me the monastic tonsure under the mantle of Fr. Gabriel. This was in 1992; I didn't have anything needed for the tonsure, and he brought me his new mantia. He had two of them, but he didn't like new things and always wore the old one. For me this is now an enormously holy object and a consolation. When people come to me and ask me to bring out the saint's mantia, I always fulfill their request and bless them with this mantia.²⁴

Irakli Gogoladze relates a miracle that happened in his family through the prayers of Fr. Gabriel, after his death but before his glorification:

Elder Gabriel wasn't yet glorified when I first heard about him. Our first “encounter” was when I was, I think, in the seventh grade and visited Samtavro Monastery with my friends. Still only a child, I was amazed by everything I saw at the elder's grave—first of all, by the

²⁴ From an article by Larisa Khrustalyeva, translation from <http://www.pravoslavie.ru/english/87682.htm>.

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unbelievable number of people who came to venerate there. Without any real awareness of what I was doing, I also approached the grave, and that was when my friendship with Elder Gabriel began. Bowing at the grave, I felt enormous grace. My heart was filled with love. Feeling this inner joy I wanted to shout as loud as I could, "I LOVE YOU ALL!" Nun Parasceva gave us some oil from the lampada over Elder Gabriel's grave and explained how to anoint ourselves with it. I felt as though I had obtained some invincible power. And that's how it was!

A few months passed, and disaster struck our home. My father fell sick with psoriasis. We made the circuit of all the hospitals but his was such a severe form and advanced stage that none of them would even receive us. After some time, through the intercessions of our relatives, my father was received in the Tbilisi Hospital for Skin and Venereal Diseases. The treatment went very slowly. The doctors said that he would need at least four months to completely recover. One night, my father had a heart attack, and they were barely able to save his life. Then I remembered the elder, at whose grave miraculous healings take place. I ran home, took the oil from the lampada over Elder Gabriel's grave, and came to the hospital. The doctors were not allowing anyone into my father's room, but when I explained the situation they agreed and allowed me in secretly. I went to my father, and he was sleeping. With my little finger I anointed him with the oil three times in the form of a cross, read "Our Father," and asked the elder with all my heart to heal my father. Then I left without a word.

In the morning, mother and I came to the hospital with a friend. We went to my father's room—to be more exact, we ran with horror when we heard the nurse's shriek: "It can't be!" We thought, well, it's the end! My mother fainted. I was seized with a trembling that I had no strength to control. I went into the room and saw my father sitting on the bed. I was stunned. The rash on his body and face was gone; his skin was like that of a newborn babe. Soon the head doctor came into the room—the same one who had allowed



The stone reliquary containing St. Gabriel's holy relics, in the Transfiguration Church of the Samtavro Convent.

me to visit my father. I'll never forget the expression on his face at the moment he saw his patient with absolutely clear skin! The doctor began to weep and cross himself, saying, "Glory to God.... Glory to that elder...." Then my father stopped us and asked what elder we were talking about. I wasn't even able to start telling him about Elder Gabriel before my father told us about the dream he had had that night. A priest with a gray beard came into the room and said to him, "Eh, my brother.... Well, so far you haven't once received Communion or had Confession, but you have a believing son and wife who called me here. I can't bear to see how they cry.... Here, let me heal you, and you start living a religious life. Go to church often, confess and receive Communion. Then we'll be friends.... Otherwise, I'm not your friend. Get it?" He winked at my father, made the sign of the Cross over him, and left....

I wept—everyone in the room was weeping! Despite the fact

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that my father had never seen the elder in his lifetime, his description of the “priest” perfectly matched that of St. Gabriel.

Here are some other miracles of healing that have occurred when believers have asked St. Gabriel’s heavenly intercessions and have been anointed with oil from his grave:²⁵

I was found to have a fibroma and a myoma. I needed to have an operation. Because of my illness I would be unable to speak from time to time. A relative of mine brought me some of Fr. Gabriel’s oil. I anointed myself with it twice and felt relief. When I was about to anoint myself with it a third time, I felt that I was losing my speech again. I said to myself, ‘It doesn’t help’—and that evening I went to bed without anointing myself with the oil. The same night I had a dream. A priest with a large beard came to me at home and said, ‘Here you are lamenting, “It doesn’t help, it doesn’t help”—but what can help you, if you haven’t prayed? Pray, and you’ll see whether it helps or not. Look at me. I’m a priest, and I have a beard. Would I have a beard unless I were a priest? You say that you believe, but you don’t pray—what kind of faith is that? Pray, and you’ll have help.’

I woke up. I began to anoint myself with the oil, and while doing this I prayed. Yesterday they did an ultrasound and didn’t find a thing. The doctor nearly went mad from astonishment.

—Pelagia Tamarashvili

In the third month of my pregnancy I had an ultrasound. One could see that a cystic mass had formed in the area of the baby’s stomach. The case was so involved that the doctors strongly advised me to have an abortion. I refused. I began to go to Fr. Gabriel’s grave and to take the oil as treatment. The child was born absolutely healthy. The medical staff was amazed.

—Mariam Kvitsiani

²⁵ From *Miracles and Healings Given by God*, by Otar Nikolaishvili, English translation from <http://www.pravoslavie.ru/english/65883.htm>.

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Glory and thanksgiving to the Lord for all things! The Lord has given Fr. Gabriel to us sinners! I suffered for several years from cirrhosis in its most serious form. On November 4, 2004, I visited Fr. Gabriel's grave. I anointed myself, knelt, and asked his blessing, so that I could be treated in the hospital, because they wouldn't admit me there. When I returned from the grave, everything worked out so easily that you could call it a miracle. I was admitted to the hospital, had an ultrasound, and it was found that there was no longer any cirrhosis.

—Suliko Gvinjilia

Last March I was diagnosed with tumors on the breast and internal organs. Almost all of the oncologists insisted on an operation. I went to Fr. Gabriel's grave in order to make a decision. Afterwards I had the following vision: Fr. Gabriel was standing there and smiling at me. I was filled with faith and refused the operation. All the while I kept going to the grave and receiving treatment with the oil. Two months ago I had an examination; nothing resembling a tumor was found in my system, while the doctors had given me all of two weeks to live if I didn't have the operation.

—Lela Tsirekidze

A young woman had a first-stage tumor on her cervix. She was supposed to have an operation in a month. During the course of the month, she used oil from Fr. Gabriel's grave, and when she went into the hospital for the operation, it turned out that there was no longer any tumor. It is a real miracle.

—Nana Siradze

13. EPILOGUE

St. Gabriel embodied not just the zeal, asceticism, and dedication of a monastic saint. In his life he sacrificed all a man can sacrifice on this earth—home, family, friends, and his whole heart. As a confessor he sacrificed his body, his health. As a fool-for-Christ he sacrificed his own mind, and the respect of men. He was a monk and an ascetic, but

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most importantly, St. Gabriel was profoundly Christian. Furthermore, he was deeply Georgian: he had the great heart and dedication to his God that is characteristic of that nation. Out of his intense and profound love for his people, he gave everything for their salvation. Now his sanctity reaches out beyond his mountainous and spiritually rich homeland to all the ends of the earth.

Holy Father Gabriel, pray to God for us also, that He may heal our infirmities, and save us!

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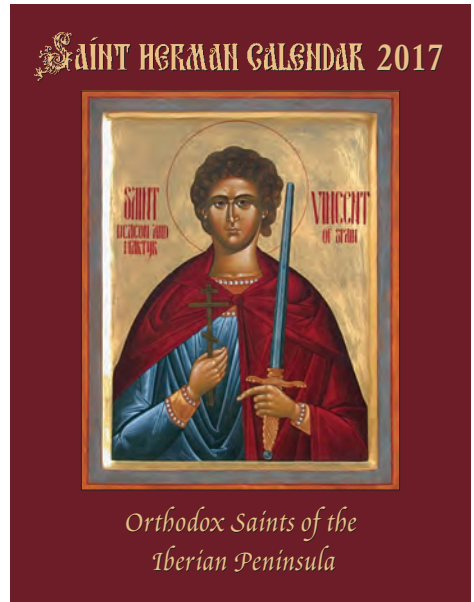
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