



Fr. George (left) and Fr. John of Bethany Monastery,  
Georgia, the Elders of Hieromonk Gabriel.



*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*

*Established with the blessing of His Eminence  
Archbishop John Maximovich*

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*Cover: Hieromonk Gabriel with Abbess Sidonia, nuns and pilgrims. Photo-  
graph taken at the Church of the Transfiguration, Tbilisi Convent, Georgia,  
by Ilia Zenko, 1991.*

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Hieromonk Gabriel in his cell at the Samtavro Convent, November, 1991.

*Orthodox Georgia:*

## DYING AND YET BEHOLD WE LIVE

*The Story of a Confessor of Christ  
in Contemporary Georgia*

BY VALERIA ALFEYEVA

### Translator's Preface

**A** MAN meek and humble in soul, who wishes to serve God and remain faithful to Him, will retain his meekness and humility even in the midst of persecution; his simplicity will neither betray God nor require him to disfigure and contort his soul with slavish man-pleasing or servile submission to evil. A typical modern man, on the other hand, with his complexes and neuroses, his desire not to offend the enemies of God, his fear of being considered intolerant, his compulsive need for self-affirmation, such a man would be far more inclined to enter into compromise with falsehood, in mind if not in heart. It is in regard to the former man that the Saviour, in the Sermon on the Mount, said, *If thine eye be single, thy whole body shall be full of light* (Matt. 6:22). Such a vessel is capable of confessing God no matter how hopeless the harvest may seem. In fact, such a soul, being single or simple (that is, uncompounded with unrighteousness) cannot do otherwise, having long since resolved to serve God rather than mammon.

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Among the servants of God is Hieromonk Gabriel, a contemporary hero of Georgia, a living chronicle of the Georgian Church, a spiritual father and a legend in his own lifetime. One of the main objectives of our pilgrimage to the land of Georgia in 1991<sup>1</sup> was to meet this most extraordinary man. We were told en route about this living confessor, a priest who underwent the torments of the martyrs but, by God's good pleasure, did not die. He lived to continue to bear witness of the Light (John 1:7) throughout the darkest years of the suffering of the Georgian Church, a Church whose history, like that of almost no other national Orthodox Church, has been a continuous martyrology, a constant bearing *witness* to the abiding presence of Jesus Christ amidst His Church here on earth.

Returning to America last winter, we pieced together what we had learned about and heard from Fr. Gabriel. It was the desire of our St. Herman Brotherhood to share his testimony with the English-speaking world, but somehow our picture was still incomplete. Then unexpectedly, in August of 1992, we met here in California an author from Moscow, Valeria Alfeyeva, who had met and written about Fr. Gabriel. Her story, "The Called, the Chosen and the Faithful,"<sup>2</sup> distinguishes three types of servants of God on the basis of the three Scriptural categories found in the title (taken from Revelation 17:14). In the book, Fr. Gabriel represents one who is *faithful*. In published form it reads like a work of fiction, written skillfully with several layers of plot, in-depth character sketches and descriptions which bring to life both the natural and spiritual landscape of Georgia. The central focus is a series of conversations between the author and the Abbot of a monastery, Fr. Anthony; and it is in the context of their dialogue that the saga of Fr. Gabriel's life unfolds.<sup>3</sup>

1. See "A Pilgrimage to Orthodox Georgia" in *The Orthodox Word* no. 164.

2. First published in Russian in *Moscow* no. 4 (1991), pp. 3-51. In addition, she has written a companion story, *Dzshvari* or *The Cross*, about the revival of the Christian Faith in Georgia. Her work will be published soon in English by Oxford University Press.

3. The setting of the author's conversations with Fr. Anthony is the Gudarekhi Convent near Tetri-tskaro, southwest of Tbilisi. Most likely the Fr. Anthony of her story is actually Archimandrite John and their conversations took place in Bethany Monastery in 1985 or 1986, when the author spent nearly a month there. Bethany Monastery was established or officially chartered in the late twelfth century, during the reign of St. Tamara, Queen of Georgia, and dedicated to the Nativity of the Theotokos. Revived in 1978 by Archimandrite John, it is a flourishing cenobitic monastery once again.



*Bethany Monastery, home of Fr. Gabriel's elders (see Epilogue).*

Out of respect for their privacy, the author has disguised the names and locations of the people in her story; but all of the major characters and most of the minor ones are real and identifiable people. Many of the new names given by her symbolize certain traits of the characters or enhance the story with a truly local flavor. She has fittingly renamed Fr. Gabriel "Fr. Abel," but we have taken the liberty of calling him by his real name, leaving the remainder of her work as it is written.

Despite the fictional elements and literary devices employed in the author's story,<sup>4</sup> her portrait of Fr. Gabriel is highly accurate. The time frame, including both Soviet and post-Soviet elements, is at times obscured because of her wish to subordinate historical truth to the spiritual truths which she conveys in her tale. Due to its edifying nature, we present in its entirety the following portion of her work which sets forth the history of Fr. Gabriel.

—Monk Gerasim (Elicl)  
St. Herman of Alaska Monastery

4. Whether Fr. Gabriel actually compiled extracts from the Book of Job, and in what language he may have done so, is not known by us, and need not be regarded as an essential element of his biography.

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By Valeria Alfeyeva

*I have fought the good fight. I have finished my course.  
I have kept the faith. (II Timothy 4:7)*

**G**AZING through the rain-streaked window into the darkness of the night, Fr. Anthony asked if by any chance I knew Hieromonk Gabriel.

"Yes, I know him," I said. "And have you been to his place?"

"Yes," he smiled, "I spent some time together with him, when there was nowhere else to go. I lived with him for two months. And a long time ago, in my childhood, he lived with us for a short time at my grandfather's place in the village. You know, up to the present time I've kept a small notebook of his with extracts from the Book of Job."

"Oh, in Georgian?"

"In Russian.... It's clear he had a Russian Bible. But he writes very illegibly."

"I would like to take a look at what he copied out."

"I'll show you. But tell me how you met him."

[At this the author relates to Fr. Anthony the following account of how she went with her son Mitya<sup>5</sup> to see Fr. Gabriel:]

### 1. GEORGIAN RELICS<sup>6</sup>

At our ring an old woman came out and led us into the garden. It was a sunny day; in the garden peonies were growing and the birds singing.

Soon Fr. Gabriel appeared on the walkway, blessed all of us and sat us in a row on a bench. He exchanged a few words in Georgian with Mitya's friend Goevi, who had brought us there. Fr. Gabriel looked at us with obvious interest and, raising his eyebrows a little, said, "A mother and son together in

5. The author's son Mitya is presently an instructor at the Moscow Theological Academy in Sergiev Posad.—TRANS.

6. Chapter titles have been supplied by the translator.

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Church... how rare this is now and yet how wonderful. Well, let's go into the house."

A heavy wooden cross with a crown of thorns at the center loomed on the wall opposite the entrance. From the ceiling and along the wall hung glass and crystal pendants from the most varied chandeliers; several lampadas glowed warmly—green, red, and dark blue—and all those transparent garlands, wires, polygons, ovals, crystals and spheres reflected and refracted the soft light.

On the wall hung an icon of the Trinity in the form of three winged Angels, surrounded by a silver-plated frame. All around the room were icons in wooden shrines, icons under glass in frames, and paper icons both large and small.

On the wooden shelves along the walls, church objects had been arranged.... Brass, stone and wooden candlestands; a candlestand in the form of a ceramic saucer with a niche in the middle for a candle; a wooden triptych with an exquisite, carved depiction of the Transfiguration, of which only the upper parts of the panels were still preserved. We silently moved along the shelves.... A white angel with a broken marble wing that must have stood at one time over a grave. An old clock in the form of an ancient Georgian Church with pyramidal cupola, covered with tiny colored ceramic shingle-tiles from a bygone era. A cracked bronze bell with tarnished dedication lettering along its perimeter, unable to offer its resonant ring. Aged aers and veils with gold crosses, entirely worn through, which had long since ceased to cover sacred vessels. A bronze pitcher, for the washing of the hands of the officiating bishop, which no longer held water.

"I collected all this from closed churches and monasteries," said Father Gabriel, moving his hand along the shelves next to us. "Sometimes I would shovel aside mounds of rubbish in a courtyard, in the corner of an enclosure or in a basement, and pull from the earth such a pitcher. Perhaps it had stood in the altar for forty years as the Holy Spirit descended upon the Holy Gifts."

"May I touch this?" I asked, pointing to a veil of cherry-colored brocade with the most dazzling silver thread-work covering a cross and chalice.

He placed the veil in my open hands and I carefully touched it with my lips.

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Father Gabriel, illumined by the reflection of the ornaments from chandeliers long since demolished, looked at us with the meekest dark eyes and his face emanated quiet joy.

That is how I remember him: tall,<sup>7</sup> in a threadbare ryassa which lightened his stocky build, with a carved icon of the Theotokos on his chest instead of a cross, and a pure and young face. The impression of his youthfulness was not overshadowed by the fact that I could see the age of the priest—he was approaching sixty, nor by the fact that three deep wrinkles following the shape of his upraised eyebrows crossed his forehead. But his extremely curly hair tied together behind his head was black.

"Sometimes I would be given things which were priceless," he said. "These treasures could never be sold. Here are merely the remains and shards of former ecclesiastical life. For me they are also invaluable, like this Crucifix from the church in which I was baptized. The temple has been destroyed, the figure of Christ is no longer on it, but I made the crown myself out of thorns.... I even put it on—these sharp spikes painfully pierce the skin; is this how the Saviour suffered?"

Fr. Gabriel touched the walls—he pushed open some nondescript doors. We entered the "Chapel of the Nativity of Christ" with a Nativity scene and figures: the Theotokos, the Child laid in swaddling clothes in a manger, the Star of Bethlehem, and lambs with their thick curly wool.

He took from the table a baking mold in the form of a lamb:

"My grandmother used to bake such lambs before Nativity; their eyes were raisins. I would be filled with joy when I stood at the table underneath the Christmas tree and smelled the rich dough with cinnamon and vanilla.... Where did all this disappear to? Why has the world been extinguished, grown cold and insipid?"

Mitya sat down and stroked a lamb's fleece, made of wool, that was sewn around one of the Nativity lambs.

"Lo, it is written: *Unless ye become like children, ye shall in no wise enter the Kingdom of Heaven*" (Matt. 18:3), smiled Fr. Gabriel. "And I, like a child, console myself with all this."

Within the chapel were other objects: a half-disintegrated monastic habit; prayer ropes with knots made of coarse string, or with polished glass

7. Fr. Gabriel is not tall, but on the contrary, short.—TRANS.

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beads. One prayer rope had little stones with holes drilled in them; others had leather rungs; still others were large and made of wool that had been worn to a polish. There were also iron chains, and brass and wooden crosses....

"There's still another room," said Geevi.

"But there's nothing of interest there," responded the humble priest.

He again touched the walls. A door opened, leading into a cell where there was scarcely enough room for a person to sit standing on his knees. There was a cross on the wall, a lampada, and on the floor a worn mat. The door opened and closed: he didn't wish to let even our gaze be there for any length of time, for there he prayed....

We returned to the first room. Mitya and Geevi were handling objects on the shelves. On Mitya's face was that expression of self-forgetfulness which I had so cherished in him in his early childhood.

Fr. Gabriel told how he had built this house with his own hands from scraps of wood and crates in order to house the treasures that he had unearthed.

"I even erected a cupola, dark blue with stars, like those on the Russian churches, but the militia wouldn't stand for it and forced me to take the cupola down. But then how many mercies of God have taken place here! There wasn't anything, for example, with which to cover the roof. And then an unknown man came, looked at all this and said, 'I am building a house; there are some sheets of iron left over. Would they come in handy?' And he brought just the number needed."

Fr. Gabriel continued to talk about how people must love and forgive one another, because the image of God is in each one of us.

"Everything bad in man is only accidental. And you, youngsters, don't ever despise anyone even if you see such people (they have become more numerous all the time): frightening, filthy, drunk and swearing with foul language. God's image is preserved even in them, at a deep level of which, perhaps, they themselves are unaware. It is simply that the enemy defiles this image and covers it with filth, in the same way that an icon can be soiled. But if it falls into good hands, they will cleanse it and it will begin to shine, will begin to be radiant.... It is difficult to see God's image in those people who revile you, who appear in the image of a beast. But one must pity them even more because their souls are contorted, perhaps irreparably, unto eternal torment.... How difficult this is—to love one's enemies—oh, how difficult!

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One must devote one's entire life to learning this.... But in such love a man comes to resemble the Crucified God."

### 2. THE VALLEY OF THE SHADOW OF DEATH

[As I related this about my meeting with Fr. Gabriel] Fr. Anthony often shook or nodded his head in agreement. Then he asked, "And is this all that you know about him? Didn't Geevi tell you anything more?"

"No, and we didn't ask," I said. "Such is the complete impression that remained."

"Now I'll go and look for his notes," said Fr. Anthony. Nonna the psalm-reader also went out, leaving the door open.

Fr. Anthony returned with a small half-sized notebook in his hands. The psalm-reader returned also.

"You're going to sleep?" she said half questioningly.

"Good night," he laughed. "She's used to giving orders."

She yawned wearily and sat in her former spot, resting her cheek on her fist.

I moved the lamp closer. The cover was very worn; most likely Fr. Gabriel had long carried this notebook in his pocket. Inside was graph paper, and the sign of Golgotha drawn in the monastic style with certain symbols. Further on was the text: the tiniest little letters written on both sides of the paper, the words abruptly ending on the ragged edge of the page.

"Read aloud," suggested Father Anthony. "And then I will tell you what I know."

*"Though I speak, my grief is not assuaged; and though I forbear what am I eased?... God hath given me to the ungodly and turned me over into the hands of the wicked.... His archers compass me; He cleaveth my reins asunder and doth not spare; He poureth out my gall upon the ground, He breaketh me with breach upon breach, He runneth upon me like a giant.... I have sewed sackcloth upon my skin and defiled my horn in the dust. My face is foul with weeping and on my eyelids is the shadow of death, not for any injustice in mine hands, and my prayer is pure.... My years are numbered and their end come, and I shall go by the way whence I shall not return.... Wherefore hidest Thou Thy face, and holdest me for Thine enemy? Wilt Thou break a leaf driven to and fro? And wilt Thou pursue the dry stubble?" (Job 16:6, 12, 14-17, 23; 13:24-5).*

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"You have deciphered it easily, evidently you remember it almost by heart," interjected Fr. Anthony. "Read on, I also have been wanting to read it over again...."

*"Man is born unto trouble, as the sparks fly upward.... The darts of the Almighty are within me; my spirit drinketh up their poison; the terrors of God have set themselves in array against me (Job 5:7; 6:4).*

*"Shall bread be eaten without salt?... The things that my soul refused to touch are as my loathsome food. Oh, that I might have my request; and God would grant me the thing that I long for. Even that it would please God to destroy me; that He would let loose His hand, and cut me off! Then should I yet have comfort" (Job 6:6-10).*

I stopped in order to catch my breath.

"Do you know what constituted his 'loathsome food?'" Fr. Anthony smiled. "This signifies how Fr. Gabriel hungered for a long time. At night he would walk to an abandoned lot behind the pastry factory where waste bins stood. Sometimes they would throw him pastry scraps through a small window. When I lived with him he would bring home this sweet slop with rich pink and yellow filling, put it on a plate and say, 'Evidently this was once a beautiful cake.' He blessed everything, ate it and then thanked God. But I couldn't eat it.... One can eat a pastry or two—but to eat that revoltingly rich and sweet cream filling in place of every other kind of food each day.... Often we would sit in front of a plate of this, drink tea with dried black bread, and then he would take it, saying, 'I'm going to feed the birds, they'll have a royal banquet.'"

"Would the birds even eat it?" I asked.

"Certain birds would. Blue jays, for example, would very feverishly peck at the creamy filling ... ravens, pigeons...."

"But why did Fr. Gabriel suffer from hunger?"

"You really don't know that he doesn't serve?"<sup>8</sup>

"I sure didn't.... For how long?"

"Thirty-five years.... But read on."

*"What is man, that Thou shouldest magnify him or that Thou givest heed to him? That Thou shouldest visit him every morning, and try him every moment?"*

8. That is, Fr. Gabriel was under ecclesiastical suspension and was prohibited from celebrating as a priest. This also greatly limited his ability to support himself.—TRANS.

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*How long wilt Thou not depart from me, nor let me go?... I have sinned, what shall I do unto Thee, O Thou preserver of men! Why hast Thou made me as Thine accuser, so that I am a burden to myself?... Now I shall sleep in the dust; and Thou shalt see me in the morning but I shall not be" (Job 7:17-21).*

*"My soul is weary of my life.... Show me wherefore Thou contendest with me. Is it good unto Thee, that Thou shouldst oppress, that Thou shouldst despise the work of Thine hands, and shine Light upon the council of the wicked?" (Job 10:1-3).*

*"If I am ungodly, woe is me! If I am righteous, yet I shall not lift up my head. I am filled with dishonour, see Thou mine affliction, it increaseth. Thou huntest me like a lion ... and hast brought trials upon me" (Job 10:15-17).*

### 3. THE COLISEUM

Fr. Anthony sat with his elbows pressed firmly on the table, his fingers interlocked. I waited.

"Thirty five years ago, in the year that Stalin died<sup>9</sup> (Stalin died in March and it all happened during the May Day demonstration), Fr. Gabriel was a very young hieromonk....

"Do you know the central square in Tbilisi? During the demonstration, the government speakers and the speaker's rostrum stood there. Behind them, on the building of the Executive Committee of the Communist Party, there always hung portraits of the party leaders in full figure, two floors in height. At the peak of the demonstration, when the entire square was packed with people and while a member of the government was delivering a speech, suddenly the gigantic portrait of Stalin burst into flames. Fr. Gabriel had gained entrance into the upper floor of the Executive Committee building, opened a window and poured kerosene on the back of the portraits and then set them on fire."

"Perhaps this is a legend?"

"Some things, of course, have been enshrouded by legend. But he burned the portraits. Lenin's portrait burned immediately, too. Horror came over the square, they all froze from fear and everything became still. While the pictures

9. The event being described happened in 1956; Stalin died in 1953.—TRANS.

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of the leaders were in flames, from the second floor window Fr. Gabriel gave a sermon: "The Lord said, *Thou shalt not make unto thee idols or any graven images.... Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them nor serve them for I am the Lord your God.... Thou shalt have no other gods!* (Exodus 20:3-5). People, come to your senses! The Georgians have always been Christians. So why are you bowing down before idols? Jesus Christ died and on the third day rose again.... But your cast idols will never be resurrected. Even during their life they were dead...."

"It is impossible to imagine.... How could they have let him utter another phrase!?"

"Evidently he also said another phrase, and perhaps more. The doors of the Executive Committee building had been locked; he had entered the attic earlier and sat there until the demonstration began. They brought him down, it is true, quick enough: they brought in some fire engines and raised ladders...."

Up until this time Fr. Anthony had spoken excitedly, animatedly; but now the fire entered within:

"But when they brought him down, the crowd fell upon him, breaking through all the barricades.... They kicked him, hit him with rifle butts, flailed him with fire hoses. They screamed: 'Let me finish off that louse!' Each person wanted to trample the enemy of the people underfoot with their shoes, to express their zeal. The firemen dragged him away."

"How is it that he was not shot?"

"The reason they didn't shoot him is that they carried him off almost like a corpse. His face couldn't be made out; he was one bloody mess. His skull was fractured and there were seventeen fractured bones in his body. He lay almost unconscious for a month. But he was treated carefully so that investigations could be conducted.... It seemed that they were going to arrange a show trial—but they couldn't even get the condemned man onto a stretcher. He didn't respond to the treatment at all; the entire time he was at death's door but he didn't die. This is what I was told, I had only just been born at the time. Beyond that I don't know anything with certitude, Fr. Gabriel won't speak with anyone about it. Either it dragged on until the Khrushchev amnesties, or they tried for a long time to uncover a conspiracy, to get out of him the names of the conspirators. Then, either he was certified as psychologically not responsible for his actions, or they helped him, or it became too

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unpleasant to the authorities.<sup>10</sup> When within several years they released him, he was suspended from priestly ministry. Not only in the Church, but for ten years time they wouldn't hire him anywhere. It is fortunate for him that there was a house, that he had a mother—the old woman who opened the gate for you. Both of them lived on his pension: since he was a certified lunatic he was allotted by the State seventeen rubles a month. No one would let him into their house to earn a little money on the side; everywhere people knew and were afraid of him. Neither he nor his mother could appear outside in the daylight; if they did, the neighbors would let their dogs loose on them.... At first he wandered among the villages and was hired to guard the vineyards or to tend the fire in churches. Then his mother became paralyzed from all the trauma and he could no longer go anywhere. For several years he could be found sitting at the portico of some church with an outstretched hand. Even priests threw him out. Only people who did not know him would give him anything—his acquaintances turned away from him or derided him."

#### 4. THE PATH OF THE SAINTS

"How did you come to know him?" I asked.

"It was a number of years ago," Fr. Anthony said. "He was a watchman at the garden of our collective farm and lived in a little hut. During the day he would go into the forest, where he dug out a cave for himself in a cliff like a hermit. I unexpectedly found this cave—I told you that I loved to pray in the woods—and saw there three boards in the corner, old clothing, and candles affixed to the wall; I watched for his return. In the fall he lived with us, helped my grandfather, split firewood, heated the stove.... No one knew that he was a priest.<sup>11</sup> This book of his was left behind in an old jacket.... I brought it here not long ago; I want to present it to him."

10. Two further circumstances were mentioned on our pilgrimage. First, inquiries from U.S. and Western reporters created an undesirable predicament for the Soviet authorities. Second, Fr. Gabriel began to preach at first in the prison hospital and then in the prison itself, and for this cause he was released.—TRANS.

11. Elsewhere in the same book the author adds: "Fr. Anthony said, 'Fr. Gabriel also wept at prayer. What I am telling you was known until now only to him. He marvelled greatly that spiritual life had been spawned within me so early. And it was he who, when I was still a child and we met in the forest, first said that I would become a monk.'" ("The Called, the Chosen and the Faithful," *Moscow* no. 4, 1991, p. 45).—TRANS.

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"When did you live at his house?"

"I worked as a psalm-reader, but had left my job with the municipal construction crew, and in church they did not pay me. I met Fr. Gabriel, and he said, 'Why rent a room? For the time being you'll live with me.' And I lived in his house-church. In the morning I would be awakened by birds which would knock with their beaks on the window. Walking outside he could be seen sitting under a tree as in a paradisaal garden. Feeders made of boxes of all different colors, or made of small packages, hung in the branches; and on the ground there were saucers, bowls of seed. The birds would flit around and peck. A woodpecker would sit in his hand: a red triangle on the back of its head and white patterns on its wings, a very beautiful bird.... And you know that despite all of Fr. Gabriel's simplicity, I have never met a more intelligent or well-read man than him. He has read a great deal of the writings of the Holy Fathers and remembers everything, especially the writings of St. Isaac the Syrian. At the time I, too, was experiencing great difficulty, and Fr. Gabriel consoled me so that I might not fall into despondency. St. Isaac says that if one finds on his path constant peace, it means that he is far from spiritual achievement, that he has been forgotten by God. The more a man spiritually grows the more he encounters trials. When a time of great trials comes, this signifies that the soul secretly enters a higher level. If the soul is infirm and weak and asks God to deliver her from trials and God hearkens to her, then 'inasmuch as the soul has not the strength for great trials, in the same measure is she insufficient for great gifts.'<sup>12</sup> The Lord does not give great gifts without great trials, and in proportion to the trials sent us by God's Providence, is grace sent by Him.

"Therefore is it said that one should rejoice in afflictions and thank God for them.

"Hence St. Isaac the Syrian writes that 'one should have joy in his trials because one is then found in the same path trodden by all the saints. But one should have fear because perhaps he is being tried by reason of his pride, because these trials are to bring one to his senses, sent on account of pride of heart.... A man's soul in suffering feels herself lonely and defenseless, filled with

12. St. Isaac the Syrian, *The Acetical Homilies* (Brookline: Holy Transfiguration Monastery, 1984), Homily 42, pp. 208-209.



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humility and dying to the world. From the depths she cries out to the Lord.<sup>13</sup> The contrite soul God will not despise...."

### 5. THE KNOWLEDGE OF GOD

We parted at three in the morning.

I took Fr. Gabriel's notebook with me. The lamp stood on the window sill, and I held the exposed page almost right against the window. Evidently Fr. Gabriel had not copied these portions hastily or at the same time, but after copying the final chapters had turned again to the beginning to trace a new theme.

*"He perplexes the minds of the princes of the earth and He causes them to wander in a way that they have not known.... Men groan and the soul of the wounded crieth out: yet God layeth not folly to them. Those are they that rebel against the light; they know not His ways and walk not in His paths"* (Job 12:24-25; 24:12).

*"The Living God hath deprived me of judgment and the Almighty has embittered my soul, and so long as my breath is within me and God's spirit in my nostrils, my lips shall not speak unrighteousness and my tongue shall not pronounce falsehood. Far be it from me that I would recognize You fairly; as long as I have not died, I shall not yield to defilement. I have firmly held to my righteousness and I shall not let her go; my heart will not reproach me throughout all my days. My adversary will, like the ungodly, rise up against me like the transgressor. For what profit hath the hypocrite, when God will take, will wrest his soul?"* (Job 27:2-8).

And with special care, separately on a page by itself:

*"Take heed, not to incline to ungodliness which you prefer to suffering. Behold God exalteth by His might.... Who hath enjoined Him His way? or who can say, Thou hast wrought iniquity?... Behold, the Almighty! and we know Him not"* (Job 36:21-23, 26).

Toward dawn, when the rain ceased and the edge of the sky began dimly to turn green above the valleys, I read the main theme in the notes of Fr. Gabriel.

13. *Ibid.*, pp. 209-210.

## DYING AND YET BEHOLD WE LIVE

*"I know that my Redeemer lives and at the last day He will raise from the dust this my decaying flesh, and in my flesh I will behold God: Whom I shall see for myself; and my eyes, not the eyes of another, will see Him"* (Job 19:25-27).

*"I myself shall see Him...."* And on and on, the entire debate of Job with God. When worn out and thirsting for death, he cries out: "Why do I suffer so?" And the Lord replies to him from the whirlwind: *"Who is this that darkeneth counsel by words without knowledge? Gird up now thy loins like a man: for I will demand of thee and answer me: Where wert thou when I laid the foundations of the earth? Tell me if thou knowest: Who measured her if thou knowest or who stretched out a cord along her? Whereupon are her foundations supported or who laid the cornerstone thereof? When the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy?... When in thy life didst thou give the morning a command or direct the dawn to her place that she might encompass the ends of the earth that the wicked might be shaken out of it, that the earth might be changed like clay to the seal and become like many-colored clothing?"* (Job 38:2-7, 12-14).

*"Hast thou gone to the source of the sea and walked in the tracks of the deep?"* asks the Lord of the man who demands of Him an explanation of his fate. *"Have the gates of death been opened unto thee? Where is the way where light dwelleth?... Knowest thou the ordinances of heaven or the events which take place under heaven?"* (Job 38:16-18).

The Lord continued and said to Job: *"Shall he that contendeth with the Almighty instruct Him? He that reproveth God, let him answer it. Then Job answered the Lord and said: I am vile; what shall I answer Thee? I will lay mine hand upon my mouth. Once have I spoken; but I will not answer: yea, twice, but I will proceed no further. I have heard of Thee by the hearing of the ear; but now mine eye seeth Thee."* (Job 40:1-5; 42:5).

Why does the righteous man suffer? Is it not in order to tread that path that surmounts the abyss between "I have heard of Thee by the hearing of the ear" and that which assuages every kind of suffering after which there is nothing more one can desire: *"But now mine eye seeth Thee."*

Then the Lord returned all that Job had lost and blessed the days of his life more than they had been formerly.... And this is the recompense—the prototype of the resurrection of the soul which in this life or after death beholds God.

## 6. A LITURGY WITHOUT END

The clouds fluttered over Gudarekhi,<sup>14</sup> but the rain would cease for a while only to begin again.

Fr. Anthony prepared to take the evening electric train to the city. After lunch he told of his last meeting with Fr. Gabriel.

"He has grown old, turned gray; he has changed much in the last few years. Earlier, it is true, he spoke more about joy and love because he bore so much misfortune and hatred. But now he speaks more about repentance. He related one incident: 'When I was young I was told about a priest that drank. I didn't know him but I said, "Such a man is unworthy of standing before the Lord's altar." I myself lived as a heathen but I dared to judge a man in Holy Orders! And the Lord has shown me who is unworthy: I have been an outcast from Him for 35 years. I often see in sleep that I am lifting up the Holy Gifts, but perhaps I will die in such a state without having served another Liturgy.' When he spoke he had tears in his eyes. Then he repeated the words of Job when the latter found out that nothing of his remained on the earth: "*The Lord gave and the Lord hath taken away. Blessed be the Name of the Lord!*" (Job 1:21).

"Where is he now?"

"Now monasteries are being opened, he's travelling somewhere to gather money at churches. Most likely he's staying in some monastery—he's been a monk from his youth. I have always prayed that the Lord would grant him to serve before his death. Yet it is wrong to ask in such a way. God knows better which path leads each person to salvation. And His Kingdom is a never-ending Liturgy, and all who are saved will serve this Liturgy together with the Angels."

"And who will be saved?" asked the psalm-reader.

"He that endureth to the end," Fr. Anthony replied (Matt. 16:22).

*O Almighty! We know Him not.... His wisdom is unsearchable and His goodness hidden: throughout all ages Cain slays Abel,<sup>15</sup> and thereby paves the latter's way to blessed Eternity.*

14. The historic Gudarekhi Monastery, located northwest of Tetri-tskaro, was founded with the direct participation of Queen Rusudan (1222-1245) on the eve of the Mongol incursions. Monastic life continued there until the first half of the 18th century. The geometrically dazzling wall-enclosure, the wooded mountain setting, the fertile soil, the pure spring and a charming stream, were all conducive to the secluded, contemplative way of life.—TRANS.

15. Fr. Gabriel's name in the original text is quite fittingly Fr. Abel.—TRANS.

## Epilogue:

### FATHER GABRIEL AND THE LAST GEORGIAN ELDERS

*By Monk Gerasim*

*All that will live Godly in Christ Jesus shall  
suffer persecution. (II Timothy 3:12)*

**I**N November of 1991 we had the opportunity to meet Fr. Gabriel in person in the Samtavro Transfiguration Convent in the historic city of Mtskheta. As we approached he was burning a pail of papers outside his door. He turned and blessed us but did not say a word. We were beckoned to receive the blessing of the Abbess, Mother Kerevan, and in a few minutes we returned to see if we could persuade Fr. Gabriel to receive us. We were invited without any introduction into his humble cell. This cell is a marvel in itself. He inhabits the ground floor of the ancient "Tower of King Mirian," which consists of a circular room five yards in diameter: a true "cell," lined with bricks and having a vaulted ceiling. Several apertures for light were sealed up, thereby yielding the typical monastic semi-darkness akin to both caves and churches. The brick walls were covered 360 degrees around with icons of all shapes, sizes and styles, no effort having been expended to impress visitors about his "preferred taste" in iconography. He had deliberately made the effort to surround himself with a "Cloud of Witnesses" (Heb. 12:1). This is the world of the true monk. I noticed as well several pictures not of "Saints" but, apparently, of his predecessors, his spiritual forebears.<sup>16</sup>

16. St. Symeon the New Theologian declares: "A man who does not express desire to link himself to the latest of the saints (in time) in all love and humility owing to a certain distrust of himself, will never be linked with the preceding saints and will not be admitted to their succession, even though he thinks he possesses all possible faith and love for God and for all His saints. He will be cast out of their midst, as one who refused to take humbly the place allotted to him by God before all time, and to link himself to that latest saint (in time) as God had disposed." (*Writings from the Philokalia on Prayer of the Heart*, London: Faber and Faber, 1979, p. 135).



*Fr. Gabriel in his cell in the Tower of King Mirian, Samtavro Convent, 1991. Behind him is an icon of St. Nina.*

We asked Fr. Gabriel first of all about his pastoral work, about the present spiritual state of the Georgian Church, about the Samtavro Convent in which he serves as a confessor for many of the nuns, and about contemporary monastic life in Georgia. This wise pastor—who over the course of forty long and sorrowful years had trod the Lord's winepress nearly alone—answered with hope, in the spirit of the Apostle James: *"My brethren count it all joy when you fall into diverse temptations, knowing this, that the trying of your faith worketh patience, but let patience have her perfect work, that ye may be perfect and entire, wanting nothing"* (James 1:2-4). He spoke enthusiastically about the changes in the country which have permitted the Church to continue her work more widely and publicly. He said that he felt the spiritual life in the monasteries was stronger and more lively than could have been hoped for. The spiritual fathers were becoming more experienced. He expressed his respect for the present leadership of the Church. But he didn't offer anything about himself.

Seeing his willingness to offer a word of edification, we now asked him about the ascetics whose portraits hung on the wall, pointing in particular to a large board on which Fr. Gabriel had neatly arranged many of these. A number of these were daguerreotypes and obviously predated the Soviet period. In reply he informed us that some of these individuals were unknown to him; but, pointing to one of them, he began to tell us about Fr. George of Bethany Monastery and



*The Tower of King Mirian, Samtavro Convent, 1991.*

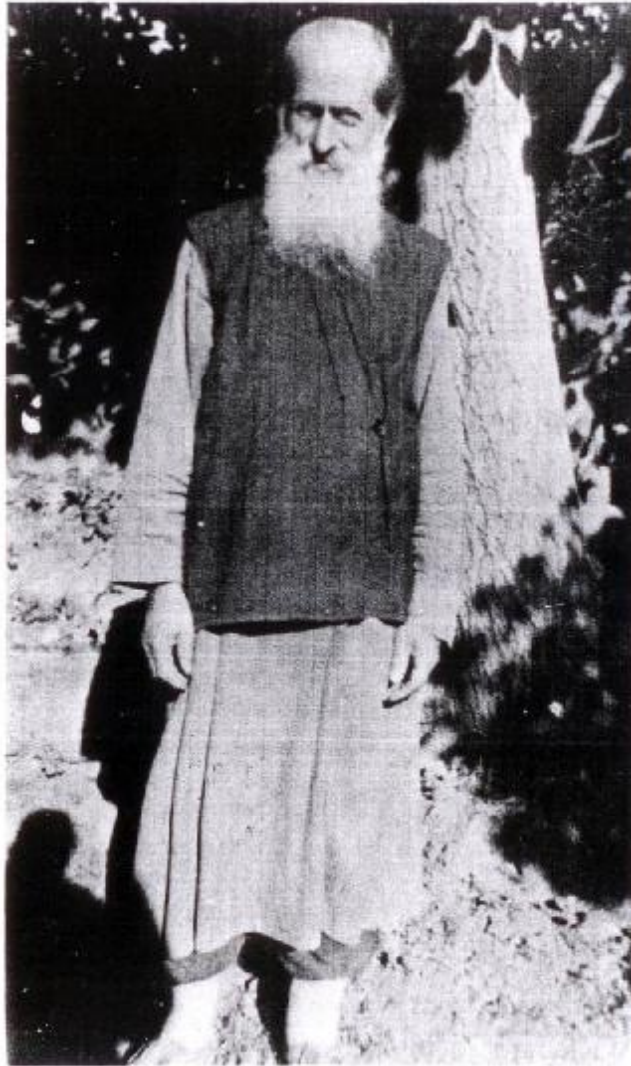
his fellow-ascetic Fr. John. Fr. George had been Fr. Gabriel's spiritual father and, most likely, had tonsured him. Both of these fathers were the last of a line of Georgian spiritual fathers stemming from before the Bolshevik Revolution, of which Fr. Gabriel is perhaps the sole heir. He continued to tell us heartwarming stories about the lives of these last two Georgian ascetics and their martyric struggle to keep the light of monastic life burning in Georgia during the middle of the twentieth century. In the canyon below the monastery they operated a mill and supplied many people from the neighboring region with flour, because of which their existence at Bethany was somehow tolerated. As a young boy, around the turn of the century, Fr. John had often visited Bethany, at which time the collapsed church was being restored.<sup>17</sup> Later, in about 1907-8, he went to Mt. Athos, became a monk, and stayed there for

<sup>17</sup> The Bethany Monastery has a photograph of Fr. John as a young boy visiting with other children.



Fr. George of Bethany Monastery.

*(This and following photographs courtesy of Bethany Monastery.)*



Fr. John of Bethany Monastery.



*Fr. George of  
Bethany in his  
younger days.*

fifteen years. When he returned to Georgia in about 1922 he settled in Bethany Monastery. With the fall of the Georgian Menshevik regime and the solidification of Bolshevik power, a persecution against religion started to intensify. He could not have foreseen the difficulties and mockery of the Faith that lay just ahead. He was joined by Fr. George and together they struggled here in the ascetic life for nearly 40 years. Occasional groups of pilgrims would come from Tbilisi, but save for Fr. Gabriel their manner of life was not understood and no one joined them. Rare photos of groups of pilgrims from this time still survive.

One very tragic incident characterizes the monastic life of this period. There lived with Frs. George and John in the 1930's and 1940's a young



Fr. George (left) with the young Hieromonk Basil of Bethany Monastery, who suffered a martyr's death.

## THE ORTHODOX WORD

Hieromonk Basil of Russian and Georgian descent. One day on his return to the monastery he was beaten almost to death by villagers whose settlement lay en route to the monastery. He managed to reach the monastery but died shortly afterwards due to wounds sustained in his lungs. The fathers buried him with honor in the cemetery on the north side of the Church. As if his slaying were not crime enough, his parents came and demanded the exhumation of his remains, for due to their lack of faith they felt it a grievous injury that their son be buried in a monastery.

Fr. George died in the arms of Hieromonk Gabriel in 1956, the year in which Fr. Gabriel's life was to change forever. It was as if the guardianship of the spiritual tradition of the Georgian Church was passed on to Fr. Gabriel. Fr. John lived until 1961. Shortly before his death he received the Great Schema, at which time he was given the name of his spiritual father and brother—George. They are both buried side by side to the east of the main Cathedral of the Nativity of the Theotokos in the Bethany Monastery, near the edge of the monastery courtyard which plunges down into the canyon below. After their death the monastic life looked as if it would disappear altogether in Georgia.<sup>18</sup>

The deaths of the Bethany Fathers took place at the height of the Krushchev persecution of the Christian Faith. It was precisely at this time that Fr. Gabriel's sufferings were so intense.<sup>19</sup> Fr. Gabriel had by then been suspended from the priesthood, an act which only highlighted the willing compliance of ruling Church hierarchs with the Soviet authority which Fr. Gabriel had so blatantly defied on May Day, 1956, but which failed to "discipline" or "squash" Fr. Gabriel, for as St. John Chrysostom so aptly averred, "A man cannot be injured unless he injures himself." Despite his official ecclesiastical suspension Fr. Gabriel was eventually honored by the

18. After seventeen years of desolation, Bethany was inhabited again in 1978, when a monk of the new generation, Archimandrite John, moved there; since then monastic life has continued there uninterrupted. Archimandrite John was joined eight to ten years ago by the present Abbot, the renowned iconographer Archimandrite Lazarus, and they are compiling the Lives of their monastic predecessors.

19. In her story "The Called, the Chosen and the Faithful," Valeria Alfeyeva includes an incident which describes how Fr. Gabriel, coming to the monastery, was attacked by the women of the village which lay en route. They hurled stones at him and tore his ryassa and for this reason he ceased going there. This might, however, be also an allusion to the brutal slaying of Fr. Basil many years ago. ("The Called, the Chosen and the Faithful," p. 11.)



*Above:* Visit of monks and abbots of Mount Athos to Bethany Monastery, 1989. At center is Bishop Zosima of Tsilkani.

*At right:* The ordination as Reader of Fr. Lazarus, now Archimandrite and Superior of Bethany Monastery. At left is Patriarch Ilia II.



## THE ORTHODOX WORD

faithful. His patient suffering of affliction won for him the love and respect of the Patriarch and all the faithful.

When we met Fr. Gabriel I was still unaware of the whole saga of his life, his personal tragedy and his superhuman labor of caring for the destroyed, defiled and vacant churches of Georgia. Unfortunately, I was unable to visit his house-church in Tbilisi where the historical remnants of the ecclesiastical riches of the Georgian Church have been sacredly gathered. Many people asked if I had done so, and described it to us in words similar to those in the above account.

Neither did I know of his long years of ostracism and suspension from the priesthood. How fitting are the words of Jesus as recorded by the Evangelist Luke: *Blessed are ye, when men shall hate you, and when they shall separate you from their company, and shall reproach you, and cast out your name as evil for the Son of Man's sake* (Luke 6:22). It didn't occur to me that such a man could have been suspended from priestly ministry, and hence I could not fully understand his "vindication" either. The intensity with which his ostracism took place is well expressed in the literary version of Fr. Gabriel's story presented above. What can be stated with certainty is that, when I was in Georgia, he was spoken of with reverence, regarded almost like an Elder, and that he inhabited a prominent location within the Samtavro Convent, which is the most "official" Convent of the Georgian Patriarchate; he wore a cross and blessed everyone. That his reinstatement was long overdue is an understatement. When I conveyed the news of it to the author of "The Called, the Chosen and the Faithful," it came as a welcome surprise to her.

During our pilgrimage more than one individual commented that Fr. Gabriel is to some extent a fool-for-Christ. One person who has made several pilgrimages to the holy places of Georgia asked me, "In what sense can he be called a 'fool-for-Christ?'" I could not explain, but the truth of the assertion lies in the fact that Fr. Gabriel resolved to live not as pleasing men: *For if I yet pleased men I should not be the servant of Christ* (Gal. 1:10). And the Apostle Paul writes elsewhere, *The foolishness of God is wiser than men* (I Cor. 1:25). In the fictionalized memoir of Georgian spirituality previously cited, the protagonist states that, "In spite of all his simplicity I have not met a man more intelligent or even as well-read as he." A fool-for-Christ is truly a wise person but before men he clothes his mind with madness or masks his wisdom by appearing to be a simpleton. In both these senses Fr. Gabriel walks this road

## FR. GABRIEL AND THE LAST GEORGIAN ELDERS

of "folly." And truly, what could have been more mad in the eyes of the world than to have reduced to ashes the Soviet potentates and then to have crowned this deed with "the foolishness of preaching?" (I Cor. 1:21).

Next to Fr. Gabriel's bed was another portrait, that of his predecessor in the Samtavro Convent, Archimandrite Parthenius, about whom he spoke with great love. He had been the spiritual father in Samtavro until his repose in 1985. His grave, we were informed, was in the cemetery on the north side of the church. Later we went and prayed at his grave. Fr. Gabriel pointed out that it was through the lives and prayers of such ascetics as these that the restoration or rebirth of the Georgian Church which is taking place today is even possible. He closed with an expression of his love for the present Patriarch Ilia II, who has helped most recently to bring much of this about.

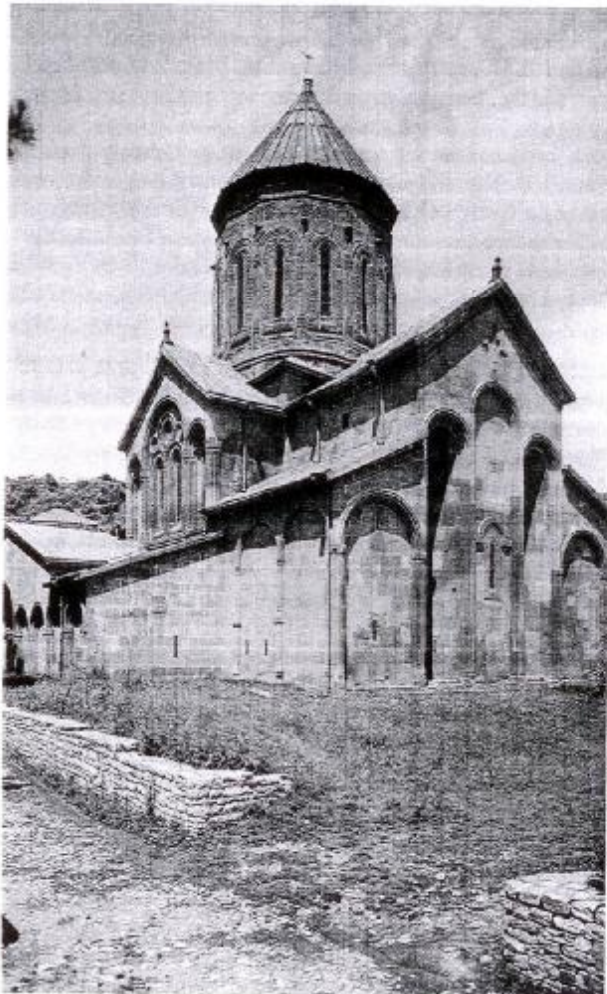
We had only one last question, but we felt extremely brazen in asking it. "Is it true that you burned a large portrait of Lenin in Tbilisi?" "Yes." We tried to persuade him to tell us in his own words what took place so as to verify all that we had heard.<sup>20</sup> But why? we asked. With utter guilelessness he replied approximately as follows:

"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."

Fr. Gabriel blessed us and we departed, having witnessed the triumph of the New Testament Church in our own day.

*In stripes, in imprisonments, in tumults, in labours, in watchings, in fastings. By pureness, by knowledge, by long-suffering, by kindness, by the Holy Spirit, by love unfeigned, by the word of truth, by the power of God, by the armour of righteousness on the right hand and on the left. By honour and dishonour, by evil report and good report, as deceivers and yet true; as unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and behold, we live; as chastened, and not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing all things* (II Cor. 6:5-10).

20. No mention was made of burning Stalin's portrait. This is understandable because by 1956 Nikita Khrushchev himself had already begun the "Destalinization" process, but to defile Lenin's image was at the time unthinkable.



The Church of the Transfiguration, Samtavro Convent.

## SAMTAVRO CONVENT IN GEORGIA TODAY

### 1. THE CONVENT OF THE TRANSFIGURATION

The Samtavro Convent of the Transfiguration of the Saviour was built on the original site of the ascetic labors of the enlightener of Iberia,<sup>1</sup> St. Nina (Nino). According to the testimony of the Life of St. Nina, soon after her first miracles in Mtskheta she left "the house of her benefactor and settled under a natural cover of branches resembling a tent outside the city wall, at the present site of the main church of the Transfiguration in the Samtavro Convent." The dedication of the church to the feast of the Transfiguration commemorates the destruction of the idol Armazi and other idols in Mtskheta through the prayers of St. Nina, which occurred on this day, August 6th, in about 330.<sup>2</sup> The present structure of the Church of the Transfiguration was built in the 11th century. It is still adorned with some ancient frescoes, located primarily in the main dome and dating from about the beginning of the 14th century. In the southwestern corner of the church are to be found the tombs of King Mirian and Queen Nana, the first Christian rulers of Georgia, converted to the knowledge of the Truth by St. Nina.

To the east of the main church there stands a tiny stone chapel where St. Nina fasted, prayed and led others in prayer for the conversion of the Iberians. Right outside the entrance to this chapel the last lone bramble bush grows, a humble living monument to St. Nina. Faithful pilgrims take pieces of this bush with them as a blessing from St. Nina. A few age-old trees shade portions of the courtyard, which is thoroughly covered by graves; some of these graves have been dated by archaeologists as far back as the second millennia before Christ. In St. Nina's time the dead were buried here, outside the city wall.

1. Iberia is the ancient name for Georgia.

2. Michael Sabinin, *Complete Lives of the Saints of the Georgian Church* (St. Petersburg, 1871), vol. 1, p. 25.



## 2. THE SISTERHOOD

The Convent flourishes today. On the slope above the main church, new monastic residences and a refectory have been rebuilt. The nuns paint icons, sew and restore vestments, and make prayer ropes. They have reintroduced into liturgical use hymns of older Georgian ecclesiastical chant. There are over fifty sisters in the Convent, and in addition several groups of nuns have already been sent from there to carry the torch of monastic prayer to coenobia (monasteries organized on the model of the common life) in other parts of Georgia.

The first group of nuns, headed by Abbess Nana, departed a few years ago to the Convent of St. Nina at Bodbe in Kakhetia (Eastern Georgia). At the time of their arrival there still remained a few aged Russian nuns from the monastic community reestablished there at the turn of the century. St. Nina had gone to Kakhetia at the end of her life and, after enlightening the local people with the Christian faith, had reposed in Bodbe on January 14th, 335. Her holy relics lie in the Church of the Great Martyr George in Bodbe. A monastery was later formed on the site of her repose. Out of veneration for St. Nina, a missionary diocese was established in ancient times with the Archbishop's seat in Bodbe<sup>3</sup> for the purpose of spreading the Gospel throughout the Eastern Caucasus.<sup>4</sup> Great importance was always attached to the See, and in the Middle Ages its Archbishop reserved the right to crown the kings of the land of Kakhetia.

A second group of nuns left less than two years ago under the guidance of Abbess Sidonia to establish a convent next to the Church of the Holy Transfiguration of the Saviour in Tbilisi. Located across the Kura River from the old enclosed quarter of Tbilisi, the Convent stands near the medieval fortress Nissani on the edge of a small bluff. Tiny rivulets of water cascade down this moss-covered bluff, giving them the popular appellation "the Tears of Shushanika (Susanna)." Standing sentry over the River Kura, the majestic

3. In the summer of 1992 apostolic work was reinitiated at Bodbe with the consecration to the episcopacy of Archimandrite Daniel (Datuashvili) and his appointment as Bishop of Bodbe in Kakhetia. Over 100 people spent the entire summer in and around the monastery. Services were held and processions took place throughout nearly every village in Kakhetia, bringing the Gospel of Christ to the descendants of the once-Christian people of this region.

4. Valentine Nikitin, "St. Nina, Equal to the Apostles, Enlightener of Iberia," *Journal of the Moscow Patriarchate* no. 11 (1985), pp. 80-84.



Nuns of Samtavro Convent today. Abbesses (left to right) Ketevan, Sidonia and Nana, with other nuns.  
Photograph by Ilia Zenko, 1990.

## THE ORTHODOX WORD

Metekhi Church in which the relics of St. Shushanika are enshrined is less than a quarter-mile away. There are eight nuns in the Convent. Some are elderly, but the monastic fervency is genuine, simple, warm and hospitable. Reader's services are held here on weekdays due to the absence of a resident priest.

In the summer of 1992 two more groups of nuns were sent forth from the Samtavro Convent to spread the torch of the monastic life to other regions of Georgia. Together with Mother Elizabeth, several sisters went south to Lake Paravana, where St. Nina first received a revelation to enlighten the Iberians. They have settled near a dilapidated 9th-century Christian Church dedicated to St. Nina. Because of the high elevation of this region, 7,000 feet above sea level, the cells of the nuns are underground dwellings covered with sod. (See a future issue of *The Orthodox Word* for further information.)

Under the direction of Nun Maria, a group of five nuns has settled in a rural area near the village of Martomq'ophi (an hour's drive northeast of Tbilisi). The Skete is dedicated to the Iveron Icon of the Theotokos. Here the sisters have a farm, paint icons and devote themselves to a study of the ancient chants of the Georgian Orthodox Church.

### 3. THE CHURCH OF THE HOLY CROSS

Looking east over the low wall of the Samtavro Convent, the pilgrim beholds in the distance an awe-inspiring sight: the ancient Church of the Holy Cross "Dzhvari," strategically overlooking the confluence of the Kura and Aragvi Rivers and the environs of Mtskheta. Every year at the beginning of May, on the Feast of the Appearance of the Cross of our Lord in the sky over Jerusalem, processions are made to the top of this ridge and services are held in this 6th-century cruciform Church. This annual feast (reinstated in the 1980's) commemorates the building and erection of crosses, which traditionally had been done at this time of year since the days of King Mirian and the Christianization of Georgia. Dzhvari is one of the oldest, most unique and breathtaking of ancient Georgian Churches and is in a spectacular state of preservation. Unique examples of carved stone bas relief on the exterior of the Church survive in good condition from the time of its original construction.

Dzhvari, the Church of the Cross, like many of the Georgian faithful, still stands fast, now witnessing the triumph of the Faith of which she is an invincible symbol.



Dzhvari, The Church of the Holy Cross, atop the mountain.  
(See also inside back cover.)