

Father Lev Gillet: A Monk of the Eastern Church, Part One

By His Eminence Metropolitan Saba (Isper)

Father Lev Gillet (1893-1980) was a lover of Christ and the purity of His gospel. He spent his life in constant pursuit of the glory of the Church of Christ and living the simplicity of His gospel in a poverty that made him as light as a bird. He was a confessor of the highest caliber. His focus on the living body of Christ which, enlivened only by the Holy Spirit, transcends nationalities, cultures, and denominations made him seek the unity of the Church of Christ wherever he worked. His longing for the unity of the Church contributed to his playing an inspiring role in many genuine pan-Orthodox and ecumenical movements. He also worked for the unity of the Orthodox of the West and to provide the West with the inspiration of the East. He was a loyal friend to the Church of Antioch until his death, even stopping his pilgrimages to the Holy Land after 1967 in solidarity with his friends there.

He was raised in a pious Roman Catholic family. His humility outweighed his intelligence and his academic and research excellence. Even his closest friends did not know how many languages he had mastered, due to their number and his humility. He studied philosophy at the Sorbonne, but was drafted for military service, wounded in World War I, captured by the Germans, and sent to a concentration camp where he learned Russian from Russian prisoners. His poor health led them to deport him to Geneva, where he was able to study psychoanalysis and experimental psychology, discovering the accuracy of scientific testing.

He then entered the Benedictine monastic order and continued his studies in theology and Latin doctrine in Rome. There began his openness to the Eastern Church. The Ukrainian Greek Catholic Metropolitan Andrey Sheptytsky also played an important role in Father Gillet's orientation towards the Eastern Church and its ecclesiastical unity. After continuing his studies of the Church Fathers, the Holy Bible and Byzantine spirituality, he joined a monastery founded by Metropolitan Andrey in Ukraine with the aim of rapprochement with the Russian Church. There, he renewed his monastic vows and took the name Lev. He made his final vows and was ordained a Catholic priest.

He served the Russian immigrants in the south of France with great devotion. He wrote to a friend: "I do not wish to do any religious proselytizing, and my program is simple. I will devote two hours to mental prayer every day, celebrate according to the Eastern Church rite, and adhere to Russian austerity, such as rising for prayer at night, fasting on Fridays, and constant abstinence..." He added, "I feel myself far from priests, churches, clergy, theology, and the mentality of seminaries... I find no satisfaction or contentment except in the gospel... I find Christ when I work, and among the workers I can find Christ in, by and through the people." One of his relatives recalled, "One day, he came to me in a hurry to ask for one of my husband's trousers because he had given his to a beggar."

A papal encyclical was issued in 1928, which stated, "Unity can only be achieved by the return of all who have separated from the one embrace of the Catholic Church, through submission to the pope when he teaches and obedience to him when he commands." This letter shocked Father Gillet, compelling him to decide, after deep study during the previous months, to leave Catholicism and join the Orthodox Church.

Father Lev found a happy medium between attachment to tradition, openness to modernity, and a firmness in the traditional Russian Orthodox faith, combined with a determination to confront the problems of the contemporary world. He did not hesitate to write that, in his opinion, "Russian youth in Paris help me to understand the emerging Church in Jerusalem exactly as the Book of Acts describes it." He became an interpreter who never tired of discovering new meanings (to him) in the Bible. His simple yet profound reflections helped believers discover the richness of the gospel in their own lives.

He understood the parish as the place where the Word of God and the Eucharist are consumed, as well as a place of fraternal communion. He emphasized the existential activation of the Eucharist on social, personal and interpersonal levels. In his letters to his parishioners, Father Lev called on the Orthodox to be attentive and vigilant to the signs of the times, to overcome their narrow spirituality and to keep current with important events in other churches and in the world through their prayers. As a confessor, he proved to be a true guide of souls; he listened to his children passionately and then shed light on the divine Word with a rigor filled

with tenderness. His training in psychoanalysis allowed him to address problems related to sexual matters with tact and clarity devoid of any false modesty.

Father Lev spent a period in the Holy Land where he had an enriching and transcendent spiritual experience. He said in a letter he wrote to one of his close friends: "I cannot think of Hebron without my heart breaking. I cannot describe this spiritual experience that I had in Tiberias on the shores of the lake. I reached the pinnacle of my life, and I must return there. Of course, since then I have been in Paris, a stranger and a sad visitor. I'm waiting for a call or an opportunity to return."

Starting in 1935, he worked with Mother Maria Skobtsova of Paris¹ who established a convent that was both a social and cultural center. Father Gillet would accompany Mother Maria on her pub crawls in search of Russian vagrants.

In 1938, he decided to settle in London. There, he liked to describe himself as an "extra-angelic" priest, but he remained obedient to his bishop. From that year, he began to earn his living by working at the British Museum. When he had left Paris, he distributed all his possessions, which were few, and brought with him to London only his bible. Father Gillet was distinguished for his high cultural and spiritual quality and his distinctive, simple style.

¹ The Ecumenical Patriarchate declared her sainthood in January 2004.