

The Life of Saint Gabriel of Georgia, Confessor and Fool for Christ

Archimandrite Gabriel, born Goderdzi Urgebadze, son of Vasili, was born on August 26, 1929, in Tbilisi, Georgia, which at that time was part of the Soviet Union. Goderdzi was baptized as an infant in the Church of St. Great Martyr Barbara in the Navtlughi district of Tbilisi. Goderdzi's godmother was Tamar Begiashvili a former Sister of Mercy combat nurse.¹ At that time, the communist regime was waging a militant atheism campaign in Georgia; the faith was being persecuted; churches were being demolished or closed; innocent people were being killed and deported. Goderdzi was about two years old when his father, Vasil Urgebadze, was killed under suspicious circumstances. Subsequently, family members called the child Goderdzi Vasiko² in honor and memory of his murdered father.

Little Vasiko was distinguished by divine grace from childhood. He would build small church structures from pebbles and light matchsticks inside them. His mother (in her later life, Nun Anna – she is buried in the courtyard of the Samtavro Convent in Mtskheta,³ next to her son) was afraid that communist functionaries would notice Vasiko's such passion for the faith, and that the family would be punished for raising the child against the communist ideology. Vasiko behaved unusually from childhood -- he

1 Sisters of Mercy combat nurses aided the Georgian army's resistance to the Soviet Russia invasion of 1921. Many of them died in battles.

2 An endearing version of Vasili (from Greek Basilios or Basil).

3 Samtavro Monastery (Georgian: ს ა მ თ ა ვ რ ო ს მ ო ნ ა ს ტ ვ ო ო) is a monastic complex that combines the Samtavro Transfiguration Church and the Nunnery of St. Nino in Mtskheta, Georgia. Built in the 4th century by King Mirian III, and reconstructed in the 11th century by King George I and Catholicos-Patriarch Melchizedek I, Samtavro is an important Early and High Medieval historical and architectural monument and was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 1994 along with other historical monuments in Mtskheta.

would avoid playing with his peers and prefer solitude and silence. However, the child had one strange hobby: he would hold a long stick in his hand and run toward birds. The birds around him would cling to this stick and follow him with a flutter. Such things surprised everyone who witnessed them. Vasiko was surprisingly gentle. He did not let a mouse trap be set at home; he would catch the mouse alive in a cage and then let it out into the yard. Vasiko was enrolled in school at the age of 6. He learned to read and write easily, and earned universal love with his good behavior. He first heard the name of Christ at the age of seven, which completely changed Vasiko's life. Soon, he saved money and bought a Gospel, which became the beginning of his new life. From that day until the end, monk Gabriel was guided by one thought and desire – to live only for Christ. He read his Gospel all day long and was not interested in much else; if he glanced at his lessons briefly, they would not take up much time. When he went to bed, he would go into his room and pray for a long time in the corner with icons. A few days before his death, monk Gabriel recalled that period of his childhood: “I was sitting on the second floor, thinking to myself, when an inner voice told me – look at the sky. I got up, went to the edge of the balcony, looked up and saw a large cross erected in the sky. I didn't believe it then, but now I know that this was my cross, which I had to bear and carry out of love for God and my neighbor.”

Another memory of Monk Gabriel refers to the same period: “one night, when I was sleeping, I suddenly woke up and saw a demon with a terrible face standing in front of me. It was looking at me with anger. By the grace of God, I was not afraid, I tensed up, but I did nothing to chase it away, I simply looked at it in surprise. It roared at me – ‘Are you fighting me?!’ And hit me in the head with a fist.” Little Vasiko benefitted from this ordeal – Monk Gabriel himself testified: “When I saw the demon, my faith in Christ was completely strengthened, because I said, if the devil exists, then God exists even more. And at the same time, my good friend, I saw and appreciated the beauty of man.”

When he was 12 years old, Vasiko was granted the grace of power and divine revelations from the Lord for his pure love and active life. Nun Pelagia (an Igumenia of the Holy Mother of God Monastery in Gurjaani, eastern Georgia), a peer and neighbor of Monk Gabriel, recalled:

One summer day, my uncle came to the house and said loudly for everyone to hear, "Glory to Christ God, He still has His chosen people on earth." When asked, "What happened, what surprised you?" He told us: "I was walking home along the old Barbara road and when I approached the ruined church of St. George, what did I see? Goderdzi, Vasiko's boy, was clearing the church of large boulders in the scorching heat. He was so absorbed in his work that he didn't notice me for a while, and I didn't say anything when I saw him working. When he noticed me, he was happy and said to me: "Come, Uncle Mukha, and if you can," he pointed to a large boulder, "lift it." My uncle was called "Mukha"⁴ for his great strength and bravery, and that was his name. Mukha continued: "I tried very hard, but I couldn't move the boulder from its place. Then he came and said, "In the name of Christ," lifted it up, and placed it near the stones piled up outside the church." Ours was a family of believers, but because of that oppressive regime, they stopped going to church and fasting. Uncle Mukha began to live a Christian life again from that day on.

During World War II, people who were unfortunate and had no news of their relatives from the front would go to Vasiko to find out what was going on. Father Gabriel, who was 12 years old at the time, would give everyone an answer and preach at the same time: "Go to church, do not miss Christ and do not lose the salvation of your soul."⁵ Little Vasiko's word never failed; grateful people gradually returned to their faith and began to go to church. Vasiko always avoided praise from people and, in order to humble himself, sometimes behaved very strangely: in the most prominent place in the neighborhood, he would sit in a pile of garbage and say loudly: "Don't forget, Vasiko, that you are trash and don't think of yourself as someone great." Vasiko's family members disliked him for this and even punished him, but people still avoided mocking and insulting him.

Another amazing story from the same period of Monk Gabriel's life concerns holy icons. During the persecution of the church by the communist regime, people hid holy icons in attics or in various storage rooms. Many people lost faith and could no longer give the relics the due respect. Little Vasiko would approach people and say: "You have

4 "Mukha" (Georgian: მუხა) means "Oak tree." Georgian oak (*Quercus iberica*) is a large tree that can reach a height of up to 40 meters (130 feet).

5 During World War II, the Soviet regime stopped oppressing the church, released the imprisoned clergy, and reopened parishes. In many cases later in the war they even had priests icons blessing the troops before the battle.

an icon resting in your house [he would name the exact place]. Either give it the proper respect, or give it to me and I will have it with me; later, if you again wish to respect it, come and I will gladly return it to you.” Some regretted it and kept the icon, while others, who did not wish to do so, gave the icon to the boy. However, everyone who encountered him in such a manner was surprised. Little Vasiko treated the icons with special love. Subsequently, the chapel he built as a monk and his cell at the Samtavro convent, still amaze people with the large, beautiful icons decorated with love and care. They almost completely cover the walls and ceiling, which makes an unforgettable impression on pilgrims and visitors.

Little Vasiko's seemingly carefree life did not last long. His mother, Barbara, was a conscientious and hardworking woman. In her youth, she was beautiful and got married early, at the age of 14. From her first marriage, she had three children, Emma, Michael and Goderdzi-Vasiko. Then, a tragedy struck the family – her husband Vasili died under unclear circumstances. The 22-year-old woman found herself in a helpless situation. She had no one to support her family and was forced to work hard to support the children. From her second marriage, she had a daughter, Juliet. Vasiko faced the first serious test at the age of 12. Mother, despite not being an unbeliever, almost completely forbade little Vasiko from participating in religious life. At first, when her son showed an amazing desire for faith, it surprised her mother. But when Vasiko's faith in Christ took on a deep and developed form, her mother categorically demanded that her son to abandon his religious devotion: “You are a human being, why do you torture yourself? Live normally, like everyone else. If you want to be a believer, be one, but not like that, only desire the Gospel and faith.”

Many years later, when the seriously ill Monk Gabriel was visited by his elderly mother and sisters in the cell of the Samtavro monastery a year before his death, a tearful Barbara addressed him with tears: “What was your life, Gabriel, except suffering and torture? You didn't have a childhood and nothing; what would have happened if you had believed a little less and taken care of yourself? You were also a human being.”

When Father Gabriel saw his mother with tears in her eyes, he was sad. On the one hand, he was sad because his biological mother still didn't understand him. Further, she was a mother who had participated in her son's difficult life, and her tears came

from a lifetime of deep pain. After a short silence, Father Gabriel answered in a gentle voice: “I couldn't live any other way.”

Even at the age of twelve, Vasiko could not live a different life. Furious at hearing another refusal from her son, Barbara threw the Gospel into the toilet. Vasiko immediately took out the Gospel, held it to his heart, and wept bitterly. This was the turning point when Vasiko had to make his choice. At midnight, Vasiko took his Gospel and left home. It was late autumn. The child, who had traveled all night and day, arrived in Mtskheta in the evening. He first visited the Samtavro nunnery. Igumenia (Abbess) Anusia (Kochlamazashvili) received Vasiko with love, warmed him, and fed him, but could not keep him, because the nunnery did not accept men, and asked him to go to Svetitskhoveli.⁶ Vasiko fervently prayed to the icon of the Mother of God of Iveria and asked to be given a cell and the right to live in the monastery. They kept him in Svetitskhoveli for 3 days, because the government decree prohibited the long-term shelter of minors. Then he was taken to the Shio-Mghvime monastery,⁷ where he was also sheltered for only 3 days and was sent on a short trip to the Zedazeni monastery.⁸ At that time, several venerable monks were working in Zedazeni. They fell in love with the young believer so much that they arranged a secret dwelling for him near the monastery and left him there for several weeks. Due to the strict control by the Soviet secret police, the monks were forced to send the child, who was passionate about divine services, to the Bethany monastery.⁹ They explained to him in detail how to get there and also gave him provisions for the road. In Bethany, he was met by two monks - the venerable Father Giorgi (Mkheidze) and the venerable Father Ioane (Maisuradze). The Bethany monks became the most beloved teachers of the monk Gabriel.

6 Svetitskhoveli Cathedral (literally the “Cathedral of the Living Pillar” of Lifegiving Cross) is an 11th century church complex located in the town of Mtskheta, a few miles northwest of the Georgian capital Tbilisi.

7 Shio-Mghvime Monastery (the Cave of [St.] Shio) is a 6th century monastic complex founded by one of the thirteen Assyrian fathers near Mtskheta.

8 Zedazeni Monastery was founded by St. John, one of the Assyrian fathers in the 6th century northeast to Mtskheta.

9 Bethany Monastery, Monastery of the Nativity of Theotokos, is an 11th century monastery about 16 km southwest of Tbilisi. It was closed by Soviet authorities between 1963 and 1978.

The child could not stay permanently in Bethany monastery either. After he left, the exact circumstances of life of Vasiko remain little known. For some time, he was sheltered by a kind woman, Margo, who was a well-known fortune-teller in Tbilisi. Little Vasiko was worried that such a kind person had made a mistake and was in great sin. Once Margo fell ill, and Vasiko consoled her and said: “I will receive the people instead of you.” Indeed, the God-fearing child preached about Christ to the people who came for readings and convinced them of the necessity of church life. God gave Vasiko the gift of prophecy and he would talk to the people who came to ask about their trials and sins, which they did not even remember. He would urge them to go to confession to the priest and receive Holy Communion. The visitors were amazed and surprised by the child's behavior. With Vasiko's help, Margo abandoned fortune-telling and began a church life, which caused great speculation in Tbilisi at that time.

Meanwhile, Vasiko's mother had been searching tirelessly all this time and finally found his whereabouts. Happy to finally find her son, the mother convinced her son to return home, and promised not to interfere with his religious devotion. So Vasiko returned home. After that, Barbara never showed a strict attitude towards her son again, although from time to time, she urged him to lead a regular life and not to concentrate on the faith so much. After returning home, Vasiko would visit Bethany at least once a month and assist the venerable monks living there with various tasks.

When Vasiko turned 16, he set off on foot to visit Martkopi Monastery.¹⁰ Here, Vasiko was met by the venerable monk Father Aitala, whom Father Gabriel greatly appreciated and would respectfully recall in later years: “He was a great monk, a monk who could see far.” Another story is noteworthy from this period of Father Gabriel's life: at the old Vera cemetery,¹¹ where cadets who died in the fight for Georgia's independence were buried,¹² the communist government decided to a public park and

10 Martkopi Monastery is a monastic complex 25 km east of Tbilisi. It was originally founded in the 6th century by monks of stylite practice. The current structures are from the 17th -- 19th centuries.

11 Vera – one of the oldest neighborhoods of Tbilisi.

12 The Georgian cadets, commonly known as Junkers in Georgia, defended the country from Russia's communist forces in the war of 1921. Soviet Russia invaded the Democratic Republic of Georgia in early 1921, overthrew its government, and established a Soviet regime in late February of the same year.

razed the cemetery with bulldozers. As a result of this barbaric act, the bones of the dead were to be found on the ground. Young Vasiko suffered greatly from this and, night after night, secretly collected the bones in a sack and buried them in a safe place.

In 1949, Vasiko was drafted into the Soviet army. He did his military service in Batumi, in the border guard forces. Despite the strict regime, Vasiko managed to observe the fast. He secretly even went to the functioning church of St. Nicholas and partook of the Holy Mysteries. After completing his compulsory military service, Vasiko returned home. Soon, he was summoned to a psychiatric dispensary and interrogated.¹³ There, he was reminded of his childhood vision, when an evil spirit appeared to him at the age of twelve. A few days later, Vasiko received a document informing him that he was considered mentally ill and was prohibited from holding official positions. He was declared disabled, assigned a second-category disability pension. However, had the fact of his disability been true, his military service would have been in a gross violation of the law, since under Soviet law, such a person could not serve in the army. As a common practice, Soviet authorities would declare religious people mentally unfit in order to prevent them from holding public office and pose threat to the communist system.

From that time on, Vasiko took his spiritual life even more seriously. He built a small dwelling in the backyard of his house, where he began to labor in solitude and peace. He attended services at the Sioni Cathedral.¹⁴ The young Vasiko soon caught the attention of His Holiness and Beatitude, Catholicos-Patriarch of All Georgia Melchizedek III. With the blessing of the Patriarch, Vasiko began working as a watchman, and later served as a reader in the Sioni Cathedral. On January 30, 1955, Vasiko was ordained a deacon. On February 23 of the same year, Deacon Goderdzi was tonsured a monk and according to his request, was named Gabriel. Three days later, Bishop Gabriel (Chachanidze) of Kutaisi-Gaenati ordained him as a priest-monk in the Saints Peter and Paul Cathedral of Kutaisi.

13 In the Soviet Union, the term “dispensary” was almost always used in reference to psychiatric treatment centers.

14 Sioni (Zion) Cathedral or the Sioni Cathedral of the Dormition of Theotokos was originally founded in the 6th century. The current building was erected in the 13th century, with some modifications done in the 17th and the 19th centuries.

Soon after his ordination, Father Gabriel started experiencing severe spiritual struggles, and very likely, he also experienced pressure from Soviet authorities to abandon his priestly vocation. His case became a subject of correspondence between Catholicos-Patriarch of Georgia Melchizedek III and Metropolitan of Kutaisi Gabriel. These two most influential fathers of the Georgian church discussed Father Gabriel's service from March to October of 1955. In March 1955, Metropolitan Gabriel notified the office of Catholicos-Patriarch that Father Gabriel had requested to be relieved from his clerical duties and to secular life. As such, he had been suspended Father Gabriel from liturgical service. At the same time, Father Gabriel petitioned Patriarch Melchizedek to allow him to remain in the church as a monk. In August 1955, Father Gabriel's case was returned from the Patriarchate back to Metropolitan Gabriel's office. In October 1955, Patriarch Melchizedek interceded on behalf of Father Gabriel and petitioned the Metropolitan to restore the priest's liturgical privileges, to which the Metropolitan of Kutaisi readily ascended.¹⁵

From the day of his ordination, Monk Gabriel worked with amazing love and zeal for God and his neighbor. With the blessing of Melchizedek III, he first served in Zion, and from 1960 he worked in the Bethany Monastery, together with his beloved mentor, Father Giorgi (Mkheidze) and the priest-monk Vasili (Pirtskhalava). At the end of 1962, after the deaths of Father Ioane (Maisuradze), the priest-monk Vasili (Pirtskhalava), and Father Giorgi (Mkheidze), the government closed the Bethany Monastery.¹⁶ Monk Gabriel returned to Tbilisi, where he completed the construction of a small seven-domed church in his homestead yard all by himself.

From 1962 to 1965, Monk-Priest Gabriel served in the Holy Trinity Cathedral in Tbilisi, where he had a small congregation. It is difficult for the modern generation to imagine the amazing courage of the young Monk-priest Gabriel, who took a shocking and unprecedented step against the most terrible communist system: on May 1, 1965, at

15 Nun Efemia, *Beris diadema* (in Georgian). Tbilisi: Grifoni, 2019.

16 From the late 1950s, Soviet authorities under Premier Khrushchev renewed the persecution of the church: they ordered most of the parishes and monasteries re-established in the 1940s and early 1950s to be closed, and established strict controls over religious life. However, there was one important difference from the persecutions of the 1920s and the 1930s: clergymen and faithful were no longer shot, exiled and imprisoned en masse.

a demonstration in front of the Council of Ministers, he burned a huge portrait of Lenin. The monk boldly preached to the terrified people: “Glory is not due to this dead man, but to Christ the God, who crushed death and gave us eternal life.”

The agitated communist crowd mercilessly beat Monk Gabriel. Authorities declared a first-category emergency in the city, and the monk was only saved from death by the intervention of the infamous 8th Regiment of the Soviet Internal Forces. The barely alive Monk Gabriel was taken to a security prison with 17 fractures to his jaw, face, and body. He was told that he would be tried under the sedition act, which carried the death penalty, and was promised the legal proceedings would be carried out as mere formalities. However, the regime prosecutors made Monk Gabriel a proposal: he had to admit that he had done the act of burning Lenin’s portrait at the instigation of the church, and in return they offered to spare his life. Despite prolonged suffering and torture, Monk Gabriel stood firm. On the contrary, during another interrogation, he again called Lenin a beast, for which he was beaten and tortured again. The story of Monk Gabriel’s suffering was leaked to the international press. This incredible and sensational story was widely reported in European and American magazines and newspapers. This development likely saved his life because Soviet authorities did not want to admit to participating in persecutions on religious grounds. Instead of being shot, Father Gabriel was transferred to a psychiatric hospital as a mentally ill person. The Soviet government intended to isolate Father Gabriel forever in a psycho-neurological hospital, but the Lord had different plans for his servant.

An excerpt from the medical report related to this case is telling:

The Psycho-Neurological Hospital of the Healthcare Service of the City of Tbilisi
19/ 1 – 1966
Tbilisi
Elektronis St., 1

Patient Urgebadze Goderdzi, son of Vasili, born in 1929, with Grade Six education, resident of Tetrtskaro St. 11. He was hospitalized in the city psycho-neurological hospital on 08.18.1965, delivered from a prison for involuntary treatment.

The diagnosis: psychopathic personality, prone to psychotic breakdowns similar to schizophrenia.

Discharged: 09/19/65. According to the anamnesis, at the age of twelve he was haunted by an evil spirit, with horns on his head... The patient claims that everything bad that happens in the country and in the world is the fault of evil. He started going to churches at the age of 12, praying, buying icons, studying church scripture... He was drafted into military service in 1949. Even while there, he spent his free time in church. He didn't eat anything on Wednesdays and Fridays. His seniors and soldiers listened to his delusions with laughter: "On Wednesday, Judas sold Christ for thirty pieces of silver, and on Friday, the Jewish high priests crucified him." He was simply hallucinating.... As it turns out from the case, on May 1, 1965, on the day of the [May Day] demonstration, he burned a large portrait of Lenin, which was hanging on the building of the Council of Ministers. After interrogation, he declared that he did this so that the image of the crucifixion of Christ should hang there, that an earthly person cannot be deified. [Authorities had] doubts arose about his mental health, which is why he was sent for a forensic psychopathic examination. The examination revealed that the patient has a confused orientation in place, environment, and time. He mutters to himself in a low voice: he believes in the existence of a heavenly being, God, and angels, etc., The main axis of psychopathy is always directed towards the claim that everything is by God's will, etc. He keeps away from other crazy people in the department. If anyone talks to him, he certainly mentions God, angels, icons, etc. He is completely uncritical of his condition. He underwent treatment with Aminazin and symptomatic therapy, after which he was taken to the [involuntary psychiatric hold] commission.

Hospital Act No. 42
1965.

/Commission Chairman: Candidate of Medical Sciences/ Chief Physician T. Abramishvili

Members: J. Shalamberidze and Doctor Kropov.

Discharged from the hospital on 09/19/65.
His mother took him home.

Dr. Lezhava 01/19/1966

Such a supposedly condemning conclusion from psychiatrists is proof of Father Gabriel's piety and uniqueness. It is surprising that Soviet medical authorities wrote a medical diagnosis describing nothing but Father Gabriel's pious life, and it was accepted by [Communist] Party leaders as satisfactory. When God's will enters people's lives, many amazing things happen to our minds. Father Gabriel was released 7 months after his arrest, which was partly due to the efforts of the distinguished Georgian psychiatrist Avlip Zurabashvili.

Three decades later, when Father Gabriel was laboring in the Samtavro Monastery, he was visited by a member of the brotherhood of St. Herman of Alaska, one of the most famous Orthodox monasteries in the United States, Hieromonk Gerasim, who later published an in English dedicated to Father Gabriel. The essay ends with the following words: "Father Gabriel blessed us and we departed having witnessed the triumph of the New Testament Church in our day."¹⁷

The period after the discharge from a psychiatric hospital was tumultuous in the life of Father Gabriel. Although Father Gabriel was allowed to remain a priest, he was forbidden to serve in the church. Due to this change, he attended the liturgy with the parishioners and received communion as a layman. He was often summoned by the security policy, from which he returned terribly beaten. There was even a case when he was so severely beaten that he could no longer walk. Then, his family members were informed of his whereabouts and asked to take him home. From that time on, Father Gabriel began to live in a way that was very painful for him. He had to appear spiritually ill to people; outwardly he had to renounce his usual way of life. Instead of remaining silent, he preached loudly in the streets. If before he had strictly forbade himself wine, now he would drink in public for everyone to see and show himself drunk. Being a monk is a great virtue. To be a fool in front of people required extraordinary heroism, spiritual strength, and divine intelligence. "For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength" (1 Cor. 1:25). The great humility of Gabriel the Elder is astonishing. His elder sister, Mrs. Emma, remembered:

17 Monk Gerasim, "Father Gabriel and the Last Georgian Elders," *The Orthodox Word*, Vol. 28, No. 5 (166), Sept-Oct 1992.

- No, we could not understand him. He was a man of a different kind of spirit from childhood. When he was ordained a priest, people paid him special respect. When Gabriel came home, he often cried heartily when he entered his chapel. Once the chapel door was open and when I heard the sound of crying, I went in and asked him in concern – Vasiko, brother, why are you crying like that? Is there something wrong with you?

- Sister, Christ was born in a manger, and people pay me respect and kiss my hands.

Despite Father Gabriel's deep humility, his amazing personality showed grace, love, kindness, wisdom, prophecy, and knowledge of the hidden secrets of people. This, with his seeming ability to transcend the confines of time, space and matter, made him a subject of respect and reverence by many clergymen and laity alike.

Four years passed since the release of Father Gabriel from his detention in a psychiatric ward. Communist authorities could not accept the courageous labor and confession of the monk. They decided to demolish his chapel, which was an expression of the constant struggle of the Godless red regime against Father Gabriel. Amazingly, Father Gabriel rebuilt the destroyed chapel. Subsequently, first a police chief visited him secretly and apologized, and then the secretary of the district committee.

Father Gabriel soon restored the chapel, but not in its original form. Instead of 7 domes, only one high dome was erected. Today, this amazing chapel built by Father Gabriel preserves this form. In 1971, with the blessing of Catholicos-Patriarch Ephrem II and Metropolitan Ilia (today the Catholicos-Patriarch of Georgia; His Holiness was the head of the seminary at that time), Father Gabriel was appointed rector of the Samtavro Monastery and Seminary for females. He was given a cell in the tower of the Samtavro Monastery for permanent residence. Father Gabriel would sometimes say with pure joy: “By the grace of the Savior and the Most Holy Theotokos and the blessing of two patriarchs, I have been given this cell.”

From 1972 to 1990, until he decided to remain in Samtavro permanently, Father Gabriel took on the special task of visiting and praying in the churches and monasteries that were destroyed or closed and abandoned due to the persecution by the communist

regime. If such visits were complicated by long distances, difficult geographical locations, or some danger, Father Gabriel always traveled alone. Under normal circumstances, he was accompanied by some faithful who helped him in the service as readers or in other ways. Father Gabriel used to say:

Believe me, we are not just disturbing the air in vain here. It is true that today many churches and monasteries are destroyed and closed, but the holy angel, who is appointed here by God, sees and hears our zeal and supplication, joyfully brings our prayer to God and shares what has been heard. You see in what calamities we are now, sometimes in the snow and sleet, holding services under plastic covers, but we will witness the restoration of these churches and monasteries and the renewal of divine services [an utterly unthinkable vision at the time].

In 1987, Father Gabriel began to live in a very small hut in the Samtavro Monastery, located among hazel trees. This hut had previously been used by the monastery as a chicken coop, but later it had become defunct. During that time on, Father Gabriel rarely left the monastery, and if he did it was for three days or a week, and then he returned to his hut. This way of life was simultaneously an expression of his humility and asceticism: humility, because it is difficult for a person to humble himself in this way, to this extent; asceticism, because living in such a small space where it is impossible to stand on one's feet and enduring the damp frosts of Mtskheta in winter without any heating, when the dwelling has 2-3 centimeter cracks – an example of truly high monastic asceticism.

During this period, Monk Gabriel lived mainly in the hut and rarely, if ever, stayed in his cell in the tower. Once, an angel of the Lord appeared to him, and told him about a part of the Lifegiving Tree and pointed out the exact place where this relic was hidden. Monk Gabriel, together with the nuns of the monastery, unearthed this holy part from the hidden place with much reverence. Today, this relic is preserved in the Samtavro Monastery.

In 1990, Monk Gabriel moved to the Shiomghvime Monastery, because he wanted to live in quiet and solitude. However, while there, he was told by the Lord, by revelation, to return to Samtavro and serve the people. From that time until his death,

Monk Gabriel settled in the Santavro Monastery, in his cell in the old tower, and, according to the Lord's commandment, until his death, he spent his time in selfless service to his fellow men. In October-November 1991, the political situation in Georgia became tense, and Elder Gabriel felt the impending disaster. He would cry out: "Blood on Rustaveli [Avenue]! Blood! The blood of Georgians!"¹⁸ When a Georgian shot a Georgian on Rustaveli, Elder Gabriel rang the bells in the Santavro monastery and wept. During this period, Elder Gabriel observed even stricter fasting, and almost completely stopped taking food. It is difficult to describe with what tears and lamentations he prayed to the Lord and the Mother of God for Georgia. Elder Gabriel did not reject anyone. He lived with the sorrow and joy of everyone who came to him. He saved many people from spiritual darkness and, with the grace of his foresight, set them on the true path.

Monk Gabriel almost completely concealed his miraculous powers, but in extreme cases, when it came to the dogma of faith and the Christian foundation -- the Trinity -- he clearly demonstrated his God-given talent to prove the divine truth. Once, he was visited by a Georgian who followed Hinduism, who had been following this religion for years and had often visited India, where he had his teacher. Father Gabriel took bread, in the name of the Most Holy Trinity, he made a cross, and instead of bread, water, wheat, and fire appeared. "Look closely, my friend, and see," he told the visiting Hindu, "there is also the Holy Trinity, present as three persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit." Then, Father Gabriel made the cross again in the name of the Most Holy Trinity, and the water, wheat, and fire again became bread. "Just as this bread is indivisible, so is the Holy Trinity," Father Gabriel addressed his visitor, "one in essence and indivisible with the Godhead."

On another occasion, Georgia was visited by Abbott Joseph of the Xeropotami Monastery, from Mount Athos, together with some of the monks. Among other things, the visitors paid their respects to Santavro Monastery where they sought to receive blessings from Father Gabriel. Father Gabriel rebuked Abbott Joseph: "How dare you to accuse the Mother of God of abandoning Georgia! We are surviving because of her

18 In December 1991-January 1992, Rustaveli Avenue in Tbilisi became the focal point of armed clashes between the supporters and opponents of the first president of post-Soviet Georgia, Zviad Gamsakhurdia.

blessings and prayers, while you are not appreciating her labors!” Upon hearing this, Father Joseph was shocked, knelt down and asked for forgiveness. Father Gabriel was touched by the guest from Greece and invited him to the table. Later, it became clear that before visiting Samtavro, the Greek fathers had first prayed at Svetitskhoveli. The difficult political and economic situation in Georgia at that time, coupled with the complicated spiritual state of the nation newly liberated from the atheistic regime, caused the venerable Archimandrite, while praying at Svetitskhoveli, to voice sorrow in his heart: “O Mother of God, I have abandoned Georgia!” During their farewell, the dully impressed fathers from Mount Athos suggested Gabriel move to Mount Athos. Father Gabriel replied: “I am already on my Mount Athos. I would never exchange my Georgia for Mount Athos.”

It was around the same time when Priest-monk Gerasim visited Georgia. Father Gerasim labored in the Saint Herman of Alaska Monastery in Platina, California, founded by the well-known American clergymen Fr. Seraphim Rose and Fr. Herman Podmoshensky. After returning to California, Father Gerasim published the above-mentioned essay about Monk Gabriel, in which he noted that Georgia could not yet appreciate the spiritual gifts Father Gabriel was offering to his homeland.¹⁹

In the later years of his life, Father Gabriel fell seriously ill with dropsy. To this was added a fractured leg. In the very last year and a half of his life, Father Gabriel became bedridden as he lost the ability to walk. Only very rarely, enduring great pain, would he raise himself and sit in front of his cell. He would say: “your life is my life. If you don't sacrifice yourself for your neighbor, nothing will come of it.” Father Gabriel's hospitality was unforgettable. Before he broke his leg, he would treat everyone to food that he cooked, and when he could no longer do it himself, he would have his mother or others prepare meals and feed everyone who would stop by his cell. He was constantly trying to bring people as close as possible to the Lord. His word, which had a special grace and power, pierced everyone's heart. His sermon, which was almost always accompanied by many tears, could not remain fruitless.

19 Monk Gerasim, “Father Gabriel and the Last Georgian Elders,” *The Orthodox Word*, Vol. 28, No. 5 (166), Sept-Oct 1992.

For years, Father Gabriel preached the love of God and neighbor to those who came to him. He also frequently preached repentance, humility, and kindness. In the last year of his life, Father Gabriel began to preach sharply, about the end times. He warned those who visited him that they were living in the period of the end times:

You will witness the Antichrist... when persecutions begin and you will have to flee to the mountains. Do not be afraid! Just as the Israelites lacked nothing in the wilderness when they came out of slavery to Pharaoh of Egypt, so God will look after you, who will go out to the mountains for freedom in Christ, to escape the slavery of Egypt – this world, and Pharaoh – the Antichrist. Know that this merit will bring you into the Promised Land, the Kingdom, and it will make you shine like the sun.

Father Gabriel told everyone with tearful eyes who visited him: “Remember, God is love. Do as much good as possible, so that your good deeds may save you. Be humble, for God gives grace to the humble. Repent of your sins and forsake them, because “tomorrow” is only a snare of the evil one. Love one another, for a loveless person will not inherit the kingdom.”

A day before his death, the monk Gabriel said: “The time has come for me to leave this world.” Then he touched the icon of the Savior, which hung near his head, with his right hand, was silent for a while and said: “I have been following you, Lord, since I was twelve. I am ready [now], take me.” He spent the whole night, until 4:00 o'clock the next day, in the most severe pain. Then he began to breathe heavily and called out: “Mother... Mother! Sister... Sister!”

The entire monastery came, also family members, relatives, laypeople, a doctor, and priests. Father Gabriel gazed lovingly at the icon of Saint Nicholas and did not take his eyes off it. Bishop Daniel read the prayers for the departure of the soul. At the end of the prayer, Father Gabriel smiled and breathed his last. It was November 2, 1995.

In accordance to his will, Monk Gabriel was buried wrapped in a shroud in the courtyard of the Santavro Monastery. When his body was buried, his loved ones surrounded him. No one was able to throw the earth on his body, so they scattered the earth around the edge of the grave. Then the earth itself flowed down, as if it had

covered him with a skirt, embraced him in its heart and covered him all together. The following words were inscribed on Father Gabriel's original tombstone: "Truth lies in the immortality of the soul," Monk Gabriel.

Soon after his repose, the grave of Father Gabriel became an increasingly popular pilgrimage site. On December 20, 2012, the Holy Synod of the Georgian Orthodox Church officially canonized Father Gabriel as a saint: Saint Gabriel Confessor and Fool for Christ. November 2 was established as the feast day of Saint Gabriel.

On February 22, 2014, Father Gabriel's body was uncovered, and his relics were translated to four major cathedrals around Georgia. Subsequently, Father Gabriel's holy relics were enshrined in a special crypt in the Church of Transfiguration within Samtavro Monastery.

*Compiled from Georgian, English, and Russian open sources and edited by
Dn. Lasha Tchantouridze, Dormition of the Theotokos parish, Norfolk, VA.*

TROPARION²⁰

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.

(Tone 4)

KONTAKION

Immeasurable is the mercy of God, * by Whose goodness we behold His creation divinized * O venerable father, thou didst confirm in thyself the image of thy Creator * and exalted thy being to the likeness of God, * therefore we glorify thee O Father Gabriel, * for thou art worthy of all praise, * thou wast on earth a trumpet of righteousness, a preacher of love and dove of purity,* and thine all-wondrous humility * hast opened to the world a treasury of wisdom, * and now in heaven art thou, the advocate of God's mercy and our salvation.

(Tone 4)

MAGNIFICATION

We bless thee, O venerable father Gabriel, and we honor thy holy memory, thou instructor of monks and converser with angels.

20 St. Gabriel – A Confessor of Christ, <https://monkgabriel.ge/eng/index.htm>