

Love without boundaries, Love without limit.

My heart will burst with love.

The signature and seal of the life of Gavrielia Papagianni, a humble nun, is this epigram: “a football at the feet of the angels” as she used to say: here today and tomorrow at the ends of the earth for the love of Christ, for the love of Christ for the person of every man struck by some trial. A true Orthodox nun “according to manner, not according to place”, in essence and not merely in form. “Don’t try to learn the wonders of my life with God. I can’t find words to describe it. What can you say when you find yourself on a deserted shore listening to the waves, or in a dense forest and hear the birds, or in the desert of Sinai? Your speech won’t be more that a dissonance that will disturb the place.” And again, “Once I asked the angels; ‘So, where does God want me and what work does He want of me and where shall I be?’ And the answer was categorical: “Not where you go, not what you do, not how you live . . . One thing is necessary, how and how much love you give to all, without discrimination. Because the ‘how’ is to love without reward, at all, and the amount must be limitless, with your sacrifice. Because if love is without sacrifice, it is not of God.”

A priest in Greece once asked, “What can you tell me about Gerontissa Gavrielia?” The response he received was simply, “If you knew her, father, there is nothing for me to tell you. And if you do not know her, again there is nothing for me to tell you.” The priest responded, “Thank you, that is enough, it is exactly what I needed to hear.” It is just barely possible to relate the external events of a life.



It is quite impossible to relate the inner wonders of any life. There is an icon of Sister in the narthex in St. Innocent Orthodox Church in Redford, Michigan. The scroll in her hand reads, "Orthodox Spirituality is Knowledge Acquire through Suffering rather than through Learning." Such undoubtedly brings consolation to those who are struggling. And yet, it may mislead. The original "apophthegma" was Ὅχι μιὰ γνώση ποὺ μαθαίνεις, ἀλλὰ μιὰ γνώση ποὺ παθαίνεις. Αὐτὴ εἶναι ἡ Ορθοδόξη Πνευματικὸτητα. Sister is not a scholar. But those who loved her discovered that her saying exactly parallels St. Gregory of Sinai, Οὐ μόνον μαθῶν, ἀλλὰ καὶ παθῶν τὰ θεία. The standard translation of this in the Philokalia reads, "He does not simply learn about divine things, but actually experiences them." To know Sister Gavrilia requires not that we learn about her but somehow experience her and experience what she experienced. Strangely, the books that have been written about her seem to contain enough history and enough sayings that people have been able to experience her. The present endeavor is an attempt to make her available again. The original Greek edition of the Ascetic of Love has been out-of-print and for many years as have been the translations. A second book ΓΥΝΑΙΚΕΣ ΑΛΛΗΣ ΑΓΑΠΗΣ contains a biography of Sister Gavrilia together with four other holy women of 20th century Greece: Amalia Farazouli, Tasia Thephilakh, Theodouli Koundourou, and Maria Mastrogiannopoulou. This has gone to a second edition in Greek but has not yet been translated.

Avrilia Papagianni was born in Constantinople in 1897. Her parents, Elias and Victoria, were devout and prominent members of the Greek community in the City. She was the youngest of 4 children. Her older siblings were Vasiliki, Polonia and Alexander. She experienced an exceptionally warm and loving home. The family home was not in the Phanar district but rather in Taksim across the Golden Horn and Holy Trinity was their local parish. She had, one must say, a privileged upbringing, studying French, English, and piano and spending holidays at the family summer house on Halki. She spoke fondly of the Prince's Islands to the end of her life. Her grandfather, Soteris Papagianni had established the first post office on Athos. It was a matter of some pride to Sister Gavrielia that her grandfather had died while on the Mountain on business and was buried at Xiropotamou Monastery. The family had concluded that there was no better place for him to be buried. Her father continued as a prosperous timber merchant with business activities with the monasteries of the Holy Mountain Athos, as did her brother Alexander. They were particularly well known in the Monasteries of St. Paul, Simono Petra and St. Panteleimon. Indeed, the properties of Simono Petra at the port in Daphni, including the Chapel of All Saints, were originally the offices of Alexander Papagianni. In 1923, in the aftermath of the Greek-Turkish War of 1919-1922, the Papagianni family moved from

Constantinople to Thessaloniki. They had long owned property there and near Florina and their move was not nearly as traumatic as that of millions of other Christian refugees from Asia Minor at that time. Avriolia enrolled in the Aristotle University, reported only the second woman to study in a Greek University.

From about 1932 to 1937 she lived and worked in Athens. Then, in 1938 she traveled to Paris to attend an "International Fair", convinced the British there to give her a 3 month visa to travel to England, and landed in London with a single one pound note in her pocket. She trusted her angels, and they took care of her. World War II broke out, she trained and worked in physiotherapy, and she stayed in England for seven years until 1945.

After the close of the war she returned to Greece in 1945 and was involved with the Society of Friends establishing the American Farm School in Thessaloniki where she taught for a time. By 1947 she returned to Athens and opened her own Physiotherapy Practice. Already she had developed what became a fixed principle with her and although the business was successful, money never stayed in her hands but flowed out in charity. In 1949 and again in 1950 she traveled to America, returning to Athens. Then, on March 24th, 1954, her mother Victoria died. She had always had a warm bond of love with her mother and her passing in some manner set Avriolia free for the next adventure. On March 25, 1978, she wrote to a friend in Jerusalem, "It was the 24th March, 1954, and the following two days when I say the Light guiding me to 'give up and follow'. Every year, I have a special message given me ever since. God is so Marvelous. He educates us according to our disposition, to some so gently, to others with a strong urge." For her the angels' push was to India.

So, in 1954 she left prospering, productive, independent work, sold her practice and everything, and with many adventures of serendipity traveled overland to India, arriving in Delhi on May 14, 1955. On the recommendation of American Friends in Greece, she spent her first night at the Quakers Hostel on Rajpur St. She was in India for a little more than four years. She worked in leprosia, with the poorest of the poor, and she experienced the whole range of Indian life from the cities to the solitude of the Himalaya. The people there called her Sister Lila; it was as close as they could come to pronouncing her name and was a known name in their languages. She used to say that if the Russians had reached India instead of the British there would be millions and millions of Orthodox Christians there today because the people of India would recognize true religion in Orthodoxy. And by August 4, 1959 her angels had moved her on in their celestial "ball game". To her great astonishment she found herself traveling to Jerusalem to become a nun, an idea that she would never have imagined in her youth.

Sister told us that she first went to the Monastery of St. Mary Magdalene built by Tzar Alexander III. But the doors there would not open for her, so she went to the Convent of Mary and Martha in Bethany. There Fr. Theodosius was the priest. She asked him for a rule of prayer. He responded that if he gave her a rule, not only would she lose her soul but he would also. These great elders that we read about no longer exist. He at least was not one. But since she could read (there were no modern versions in those days so we are considering the original 7th century Greek) here was St. John of the Ladder. He would be her elder! And for the first year in the convent the only things she was allowed to read were the Gospels and the Ladder. She stayed there for three years. Years later in 1975 she was in Athens and needed to renew her passport. She needed to document that she was indeed a nun. She went to Metropolitan Germanos, the Bishop in charge of the *metochion* of the Holy Sepulcher in Athens. He responded that he remembered her there as a novice but didn't specifically remember her being tonsured a nun. "Oh, what does it matter? I will write 'nun'", and so he did.

She left Bethany when word came in 1962 that Patriarch Athenagoras, an old family friend, wanted some Orthodox monastics to go to Taize in France. The angels had their "football" on the move again. By April of 1963 she was on Patmos with elder Amphilochios (Makris) Abbot of the Monastery of St. John. She had received an invitation to go again to India, but before she left she and Thomais were tonsured as nuns of the small schema by Elder Amphilochios in the Chapel of St. Antony in the Convent of the Annunciation on Patmos. It was there, perhaps, that she received the name Gavrielia. This is said to have occurred on Bright Friday, the Feast of the Life Giving Fount, 1963. No physical record has ever been found.

From May 1963 to 1964 she spent about a year with Fr. Lazarus Moore at Sat Tal in North India. Fr. Lazarus was a former Anglican missionary to India who, as a result of meeting a Russian hermit in south India came to Orthodoxy. He lived in India for many years caring for Russian refugees from the Communist Revolution and translating many Orthodox texts including the Ladder of Divine Ascent, the Arena of St. Ignatius Brianchaninov and numerous Akathists. During the time that she was there in Sat Tal Fr. Lazarus consulted with her on his translation of the Psalter which has become a standard in Orthodox liturgical use in English. But then she left India never to return.

In 1965 she visited Elder Sophrony at his new monastery in Essex. Her brother had known the elder during his time on Athos. But she did not settle in Essex. She spent most of 1967 at the New Jerusalem Convent near Athens. In 1968 and '69 she went to Africa to work with Fr. Amphilochios Tsoukas (later Metropolitan of New Zealand). In 1970 she returned for a year to Bethany where a second spiritual daughter was tonsure as sister Xenia. Sister Gavrielia never

gathered a community around herself but did 'mentor' several monastics without ever having more than one with her at a time. Such was her charism. In 1972 she was in Germany assisting Metropolitan Ireneaus after his exile from Crete by the Junta. Her angels always kept her moving. She didn't accumulate much materially that way.

After all this traveling, in 1979 Mother Gavriilia was given temporary hospitality by a lady acquaintance. But, as she used to say, *hospitality does not imply permanence* ;;; It was then that "her angels" decided to provide her with a home. In the way things happen in the true "Tales" of God, she was given the use of a flat that belonged to Father Agathangelos Michaelidis and had been previously the Home of a Brotherhood of Theologians.

One of her spiritual children recalls ...

"After Radio City cinema turn right into Parou Street, cross Drossopoulou Street and turn right again, into Medeias St. At number 7, ring the bell with the indication: Brotherhood of Theologians "The Grace".

Not for a moment had I thought that I would meet a Nun! Monks and Nuns were not ... my cup of tea – the impressions I had until then from newspapers and the television, were rather negative. Perhaps, I was a little *too* negative. Anyway, when we had talked over the telephone three days previous, her voice had sounded very warm and reassuring. It was Thursday afternoon and I had just left the office where I worked. I rang the doorbell at the main entrance of the building and stood waiting with a strange longing of the heart.

At that moment, without my knowing it, the Evangelical "New" was entering my life.

Just then, came out on the empty stairway – to press the switch opening the main entrance door – a slightly stooping and fragile figure, walking in small steps ... *My God!!* She was the most luminous creature I had ever see! "Yes"/ ... she asked hesitatingly. I replied: "Good afternoon ... I am D., I phoned you on Sunday from Stamatis' home." How could she guess who was at her door, with her dim eyesight, standing as I was against the light, in my weird outfit?

Still, whoever you may have been, she would have opened, anyway, and you, without realizing it would enter "gratis" into the "House of the Angels" and into her heart. Straight away, without any formalities, conditions, procedures or prerequisites. She would simply open her arms and, just as if you had parted some days ago, she would greet you with a warm "Welcome! Welcome!"

That was the first surprise of her love. She made you feel at ease, from the first moment; as if she had been secretly waiting for you, or had known you of old. Besides, as she used to say, nobody was a stranger. Everybody was an acquaintance and a friend. You walked in and right away you breathed an air so light that it could not be that of Athens. Instantly, it was as if something lifted

you up to a dreamlike world. *Peace, calm, quiet ...* feelings that had been so far unknown to you. The air was fragrant with a sweet smell which made you wonder what was this place you had come to ...

Well ... you had come to the House of the Angels and of Peace. Somebody had found this Peace and was spreading it around with an open hand. St. Seraphim of Sarov says "Find peace and thousands around you will be saved."

Sister Gavrielia stayed more-or-less settled at Medeis 7 until 1989. Archbishop Damianos, when establishing the women's community at Faran in the Sinai desert, invited her to come as abbess. Indeed, one of her spiritual children remembers arriving in Athens in early 1980 and failing to find her because she was in Sinai for Lent and Pascha. However, in the end she did not move to Sinai. Sr. Augustina was tonsured about this time, and a bit later Sr. Gavrielia the younger. There was an invitation and attempt to establish a convent around her in the Diocese of Amphissa on the north side of the Gulf of Corinth beyond Delphi, but that also was not her destiny. Finally she accepted the invitation of Archbishop Ierotheos of Agina to come to the Hermitage of Agia Skepi (the Holy Protection of the Mother of God) near St. Nectarius. She was there for a little more than a year. Then she fell ill.

She "disappeared" during the first week of Lent 1990. She was found at Pammakaristos Hospital in Athens where her brother and sister had previously been cared for. Enough time has passed and most of the persons are no longer in this world, so some things can be told. Pammakaristos Hospital is operated by Uniate Catholic nuns. An excellent hospital, but the feeling regarding the Unia has always been sensitive in Greece. Sr. Catherine who ran the hospital was an old friend and arranged a private room. The doctors did their biopsies and the prognosis was grim; advanced Hodgkin's cancer. We remember her being wheeled back from the exams, just a hospital hair cover and gown, no dignity. She looked up and with a smile said, "M--. I'm going to die. From Freeeeezing." Even then she was so bright with God's Grace and the light of her angels.

One evening a taxi arrived late at the hospital. A tall, ascetic cleric entered the hospital. "Where is Gerontissa Gavrielia?" Archbishop Ierotheos of Aegina stood there with his episcopal encolpion hanging around his neck. Never had an Orthodox bishop visited this hospital. By the time he was shown to Sister's room both the administrator and the doctor-on-duty were there. Later the archimandrite came to hear her confession. He went down his list of everything one had done and everything that one could scarcely imagine. Finally he came to "Do you forgive your enemies?" "No" she answered. "But sister, you must forgive your enemies. How can you go to the Lord's judgment and expect forgiveness if you don't forgive. Forgive us as we forgive. Seventy times seventy. You have very little time sister. The doctors say days, not weeks. You need to

forgive your enemies." "But I never had any enemies to forgive." She was so full of love for God, and full of God's love for everybody and everything, she had nobody to forgive because she had never been hurt. Fr. Timothy was a good priest. Removing his stole he asked, "Will you pray for me, gerontissa?" Three days later the tumor disappeared. How is this story known? It is known.

Soon she left the hospital. Holy Saturday, April 14, 1990, she went to the nearby church of St. Paraskevi for the early Liturgy. Christ is Risen! The elder and the younger Gavrielias moved to Leros. There was a house there. They lived in stillness. There were visitors. Visitors from far and wide. Bishop Nektarius of Leros was welcoming and supportive. On August 13th, 1991 Fr. Dionysius, her confessor, came quietly from Little St. Ann's Skete on Mt. Athos and in the Chapel of the Panagia in the Kastro on the highest point of the island he tonsured Sr. Gavrielia to the Great and Angelic Schema. This is recorded and well documented.

She continued to weaken physically. Her time was almost at hand. After the coming of the new year she no longer concealed this. And very peacefully, at a quarter past six on the morning of March 28th, just before dawn, she gave up her soul to the Lord. Her only requests had been that at her funeral Christos Anesti, Christ is Risen would be sung and that her grave be left untouched. Bishop Nektarios of Leros was assisted by nine priests at her funeral in the Panagia tou Katrou where she was laid to rest. Fr. Demetrius of Sinai (now Metropolitan of Gjirokastra in Albania) was there with many, many others.

Some years later a priest came from far away to visit and pray at her tomb. He asked the caretaker of the chapel whether anybody ever came, did anybody even know that she was there. At that moment a man walked in having come from Thessalonki and asked where to find her. An answer.

Indeed, Christ is Risen!