

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

By His Eminence Metropolitan Saba (Isper)

Father Lev and the Antiochian Church

In the summer of 1946, Father Lev Gillet became acquainted with the Antiochian Church and the Orthodox Youth Movement there. Since then, Father Lev began to visit Lebanon and Syria frequently, after the Metropolitan of Beirut invited him to settle in Lebanon.

University students joined the Orthodox Youth Movement in 1947, eager to practice the sacrament of confession, spiritual guidance, and biblical studies. He began to visit them as a preacher, confessor, and guide in the archdioceses of the Antiochian See. In one of his letters, he explained the reasons for his admiration for “the honest, intelligent, loyal and generous Arab children.” He expressed his admiration for the youth of the movement who were deeply rooted in the Antiochian tradition and cognizant of the problems of the contemporary world. They were distinguished, in his opinion, by a strong spiritual life linked to a clear awareness and cultural and moral integrity. The Orthodox Youth Movement represented for him “a favorable opportunity for the universal Church and a great hope for Orthodoxy.”

Countless are the testimonies of the Orthodox Youth Movement’s members and the important role Father Lev played in the growth of Antiochian spiritual renewal. Metropolitan Georges Khodr said, “He freed us from dry dogmatism and ritualism and from narrow morality.” Describing Father Gillet’s biblical interpretations, Metropolitan Georges continued, “It was the clearest interpretation I have ever known in my life.” Father Gillet regained with the Orthodox Youth Movement the feeling of Pentecost that he had experienced with the young Russian immigrants at the beginning of his service in Paris, and he continued to visit Lebanon annually until 1975. He wrote to the movement’s youth (the second generation) on the occasion of the sixteenth anniversary of his first arrival, saying, “I am for you and I am yours, yet I do not know what the divine plan will be in the future. You are closer to me and dearer than any youth group. With you, I feel, as I have for sixteen years, the renewal of the gospel and the spirit of Pentecost.” Father Gillet carried out extensive pastoral work in the Antiochian See. He would move from meeting to conference to sermon to confession until late at night. He contributed to the founding of the monastic orders of St. Jacob Monastery in Deddeh, AlKoura, Lebanon and St. George Monastery in Deir el-Harf, Lebanon. He had a notable influence on the spiritual growth and commitment of a large number of Orthodox Youth Movement mentors, clergy and laity in its ranks, some of whom later reached senior positions in the Antiochian Church. During his stays in Lebanon, he used to visit Syria, Egypt, and Jerusalem. He wrote some of his works that were published in French in Beirut before its Europeanization, which were later translated into Arabic, including Our Father, Be My Priest, Our Life in the Liturgy, and The Year of Grace of the Lord. Until his death, Father Gillet remained a priest of St. Basil's House, the London headquarters of the Fellowship of St. Alban and St. Sergius. He divided his days carefully between his work in the British Museum caring for ancient books and compiling indexes of works dealing with the history of churches and religions. He also frequented Hyde Park Corner where he held one-on-one spirituality sessions. He was distinguished by his activity, participating in the Fellowship’s work and in London’s Russian community.

Many were attracted to Orthodoxy thanks to Father Gillet. He did not push the faith onto anyone, neither did he turn away anyone in whom he found a true spiritual thirst, but he rather referred him to the Metropolitan to receive him into the Orthodox Church.

Of this period, Metropolitan Kallistos Ware wrote: “His ecclesiastical service was characterized

by simplicity and freedom. He avoided glory, honors, committees, and administrative responsibilities. He detested all forms of clericalism and ecclesiastical pompousness and sometimes showed a sharp irony towards these manifestations. His pastoral work was characterized by secrecy, almost hidden, in the form of conversations in small, informal communities and through personal contact with his spiritual children. His advice often had a profound and fruitful impact on the lives of others.”

He gave his advice without pretense or boasting and in a frank and unambiguous manner, sometimes even aggressively. He always stressed the need to practice the “mystery of the present moment” so that the reality of God's closeness to us would penetrate us in our ordinary daily activities. Through his lifestyle in London, he was nicknamed “the monk of his hermitage: the British Museum.”

In 1956, he made several visits to Paris to teach at the St. Sergius Institute with his friend Paul Evdokimov and the new generation of teachers which included Fathers John Meyendorff and Boris Bobrinskoy. He visited Patriarch Athenagoras of Constantinople, who showed him great esteem and trust. In 1959, he suggested to Jean Balzon, publisher of *Contacts* (an Orthodox theological journal in France), that he entrust Olivier Clément with the position of editor-in-chief. With Olivier Clément, a new era began, open to other Christians and to modernity. Professor Clément was also the source of inspiration that led to the emergence of the Orthodox Fellowship in Western Europe.

In May of 1965, Patriarch Athenagoras appointed him spiritual director of *Syndesmos: The World Fellowship of Orthodox Youth*; and he participated in many lectures, including one in Broummana, Lebanon. He devoted himself more and more to one essential goal: seeking the face of Jesus. He never stopped focusing upon the encounter with Jesus in the gospel.

His books, which were so clear that light could radiate through them, documented his spiritual experience, and this was transmitted to many people around the world. Some of his most popular books remained in religious publications, such as *The Jesus Prayer*, *Jesus: A Dialogue with the Savior* (1960), *In Thy Presence* (1961), *The Dove and the Lamb* (1963), *The Face of Light* (1966), and *Love Without Limits* (1971).

From 1978 he was unable to leave England for health reasons. On May 29, 1980, on the feast of Lazarus Saturday, after celebrating the Divine Liturgy, he went for a short walk and said jokingly, "The other night I saw a young man in a white suit placing a card on my bed. Was this a dream? Check it out while you clean up!" Upon his return he sat in his chair and began to read. In the evening someone came to bring him some food and found him dead in his chair. He looked as if he had been asleep. He bequeathed his body for scientific research.

Metropolitan Georges Khodr wrote about him: “If I wanted to sum up Father Lev in one or two words, I would say that he was amazing in his humility, poverty, and affection for his friends, even if he was away from them for many years. His knowledge did not intoxicate him, and he would only display it when necessary. He would come to us with a black laymen’s suit and a single eastern cassock. I do not remember that he bought anything else during the long years that I knew him, and that is why he would come to us with a small bag that he would carry himself.” “One day we will all face the face of the Lord,” said Metropolitan Anthony Bloom in his funeral homily. “Father Lev, from his youth, gave his heart to poverty, and he will stand before the Lord empty-handed because he gave everything, knowing that he was a sinner whose only hope lay in the love of God. But we will say to the Lord: I was only a field; Father Lev was the sower and His word was the seed.”