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THE OBEDIENCE OF LOVE

An Interview with Sister Gavrilia

Sister Gavrilia is a tonsured Greek nun and spiritual daughter of the well-known Mother Gavrilia (Papayannis) (1897-1992), the “ascetic of love” of Greece. Homeless and possessing nothing, Mother Gavrilia made herself a friend of the world for the sake of Christ. She is already known to many of us through her spiritual daughter’s biography, *The Ascetic of Love*, which has gone through fourteen Greek printings: two in English, and one each in French, Serbian and Arabic. Besides speaking about her spiritual mother, Sister Gavrilia is known throughout Greece for her tapes and CD’s of Orthodox children’s songs. One Greek woman said, “They are so delightful that most of the children and half of the adults know them by heart. You find yourself humming them as you walk down the street.”

With Nicholas Karellos, our *Road to Emmaus* Greek correspondent, I met Sister Gavrilia for this interview in May of 2001 in a small Athens cafe. Her down-to-earth warmth, spontaneity and subtle wisdom in answering our questions made the “ascetic of love” come to life: through the daughter, we discovered the mother.

RTE: Can you tell us a little about yourself, and how you came to know Mother Gavrilia?

SISTER GAVRILIA: About myself, I was not an atheist, but neither was I a churchgoer. I only went to church about three times a year for the big feasts. At one point I felt that my life was going nowhere. Externally, I was successful, I had a social life, but inside there was a desert and I knew that this was not the kind of life for which we were born. So, I asked God, rather

Opposite: Sister Gavrilia.

aggressively, “If You exist, “Come now!” He didn’t come that split second, but He “came” about a week later. I was on my way to buy some cassettes, and instead of going the most direct way, I made a detour. I was riding a motorcycle with my helmet and my boots on, and I stopped outside a shop that was selling icons, books, and Gospels. I was like a “foreign body,” completely out of context. I went into the shop and everyone looked at me, wondering what I was doing there. “Please,” I said, “I would like to buy a Gospel.” The woman said, “Would you like the original or a translation?” I said, “A translation with the original too.” Then I thought, “Why not buy a book on prayer?” I had no idea what prayer was about, not a clue, and I was ashamed to show my ignorance so I said, “Do you have prayer books?” She said, “Yes, there,” and pointed to a shelf about five meters long. I was ashamed to ask which one was the best, so I chose the one with the cover I liked the most – a German painting of Christ kneeling in the Garden of Gethsemane. I took the two books and went back to my work at an advertising agency. After work I went home and tore the paper wrapping off of the books. The top book was the prayer book, and when I looked at the cover, it was the very moment of my metanoia, the turning-point of my life.

I fell on the floor and cried for an hour. I was exhausted, bodily exhausted, but at the end of this hour I was completely sure that outside the closed window were five hundred thousand million people loving me – not loving me, but adoring me. It was a very intense feeling of being loved. At the time I didn’t know what that love was, that it was Someone, not something. I got up from the floor and that was it. On the floor was my old self, and I was new. It was my rebirth, and I understood months later that this love was Christ Himself and that we don’t go to Him, He comes to us. So, this state lasted for a month until I met a priest and began telling him the things that were in my heart. He disappointed me so deeply that I cannot tell you. So, I said, “Oh, so these are the priests. Thank God I’ve not been going to church my whole life.” So, I forgot about this rebirth and how I was a new person – I had stopped going to certain places and having fun in my old ways. I’d even quit smoking.

So, there was this great disappointment, but a little later I met a friend who was a songwriter, a composer, who had been helped by Christ. He had been using drugs and was saved by our Lord. In the month following my experience I called him and said, “I must come and visit you because I have fantastic things to tell you about what Christ did in my life.” He said, “Please

come,” but after the disappointment with the priest there was nothing to say. I didn’t go.

Then a whole year passed and at the end of it I was no longer reborn, no longer faithful. I was smoking and doing the stupid things I’d done before. I went to visit him one day and at one point he opened the Gospel to read a passage. I was extremely bored, but I extinguished my cigarette and listened to the end. Finally I said, “I don’t know what you’re talking about, but as for myself, I am going to India.” He asked, “To do what?” I said, “I want to find my teacher. I want a guide, a spiritual guide in my life.” “There are guides here.” I said, “Come now, don’t pull my leg. This is a desert, there’s nothing here.” “No, no, there are. I have a woman friend who’s been in India.” “In India, what was she doing there?” “She was working with the lepers, she’s an ascetic,” he said. “And what is her job?” “She’s a nun.” “A nun, what! Me, go to a nun? You’re crazy, you’re out of your mind. I’m not going anywhere near the raso [riassa] for the rest of my life. It’s finished for me.”

But still, my sister, I woke up and I went, and the moment I saw her I knew that this was the person I had been waiting for. I was forty and I had been waiting since my twenties. At that time it would have seemed like a nightmare for me to be a nun, but, thank God I didn’t escape. So, I met Mother Gavriilia, and I didn’t stop being with her for even one day. The crucial moment came when I had to leave her because I wanted to become a monastic. I couldn’t take her to the monastery, she was already 96, and I had to make the decision – like our Lord says in the Gospel, that in order to gain your soul you must lose it. (And woe to a person who goes to a monastery for another person. We must go for Christ Himself, not for a person, ever.)

So, that was my story. That was in ’84. Two years later I became a nun, but not because of Mother Gavriilia. She never pushed the idea, and only four of her spiritual children became monks or nuns.

Mother Gavriilia

RTE: Can you tell us a little about Mother Gavriilia’s early life? She was always a dedicated Orthodox Christian, but she never married did she?

SISTER GAVRILIA: No, and her reasons were personal, although I do know that she didn’t have an attitude like members of the Orthodox brotherhoods of *Phos* or *Zoe*, who encourage celibacy among lay-people. They didn’t yet

exist, and she was nothing like that. She was from Constantinople, and she was only the second woman to attend the University of Thessaloniki. Remember, she was born in the last century, and at that time women students were very rare. Nevertheless, she studied philosophy and she had a degree in botany from a Swiss university. Of course, she spoke several foreign languages. Later, she studied physiotherapy in London and took her degree there. All the while she was very active in helping her neighbors. In 1938, when she left for London with one pound sterling, it was the first time that she put her full confidence in God.

RTE: Was this when she began to live without money?



Mother Gavrilia (1897-1992).

SISTER GAVRILIA: I cannot say that she was living in poverty in 1938. The poverty started from the moment of her inner call. Her call was in 1954. But still, there was always this inner voice guiding her. She also had spiritual fathers, as I mention in the book, and in fact, her spiritual fathers knew this inner urge and respected it, and said, “Yes, go.” I have letters from one of her spiritual fathers, Fr. Lev Gillet, who said, “You have a special calling in the Church. Listen to that voice and go wherever the Holy Spirit guides you. Never be tied to anything or anyone. Be free. Wherever the Holy Spirit leads, you go.” So that was her motto in life: never to be tied.

During the Second World War she was in England, and afterwards she went to Greece where she worked in the Christian-run American Farm School in Thessaloniki. Later, she went to Athens and opened her physiotherapy practice. There, she began to realize that her success was not due to her own skill because there were miraculous healings. She said, “How can I take money, how can I accept a fee when I am not doing the healing? Someone else is doing the healing.”

She received her spiritual call on the 24th of March, 1954. This was in one word, “India,” and then the phrase, “Go, sell your possessions, give to the

poor and come follow Me.” That became her whole life. She said, “Christ is walking in front of me and I’m trying to follow Him.” Because she was a very meek person, a very humble person, she always talked about herself in these terms. “I’m nothing, I’m just a spectator. I’m doing nothing.”

RTE: So she went to India, and how long was she there?

SISTER GAVRILIA: Five years in India where she had no money, no letters of introduction, no clue as to what came next. She was just following her inner voice with trust. You know in Greek, the word “faith” has as its root the feeling of trust. In the word “*empistosene*” (trust), we have the word “*piste*” which is faith. It also means trust. She put her whole life in God’s hands. He told her where to go, not in big neon lights in the sky, but through invitations. You know, an invitation is one of the ways the Lord speaks to us. “Could you please come here and do this, could you please go there, to that hospital.” That is how five years passed without money, and she stressed this idea of being without money, because if you have even a few dollars in your pocket you can find a room somewhere, but when you have no money at all you cannot go anywhere, you have to be completely obedient to God’s will. You have no other choice. So, this was her asceticism. Obedience and poverty with no alternative. Not, “I don’t like it here, I will go there.” It was as if God said, “No, no, you will go where I tell you to go, and if I want you to go to a better place I will arrange to have people invite you there.” So, she lovingly accepted His will.

RTE: What did she do in India?

Sr. Gavriilia: She was working with the lepers, mostly. She met Mother Teresa there. She was working with the blind, with the paralyzed. She was doing whatever people needed. For example, for some time she washed shirts in the leper colony, because a healthy person should be the one to wash them. So, she washed fifty shirts a day by hand. She was also doing physiotherapy or teaching English, whatever was asked of her. She was guided by love, with a capital “L.” St. Augustine has a motto, “Love and do what you will.” When you truly love, you can’t help but do good things around you, and give love. After many years she became a nun.

RTE: When did she become a nun?

SISTER GAVRILIA: In 1960, when she was 62, and again, she was guided by an inner voice. It was like a story, because while she was at prayer, alone in quiet surroundings, the inner voice came, “You will go to Landour and you will be guided to the next step.” Then, a week later, a friend of hers, a Frenchwoman who had become a Hindu nun, came to visit and after a short time contracted dysentery. She said, “I cannot stay here, could you please come with me to Landour? I cannot go back to the monastery now.” So, then she remembered that she had been told the name Landour, and when she arrived there she was guided by a dentist to meet an American lady named Nellie Graham Cook, who wrote to Fr. Theodosius in Bethany in the Holy Land about her. That is how, some months later, she arrived in Bethany and became a novice, and from her name Avriila, she became Nun Gavrilia, which is Gabriella in English.

Afterwards she was sent by Patriarch Athenagoras of Constantinople to the Taizé Community in France, where she stayed for a few weeks. At that time there was a little Orthodox chapel and a few priests there, but the Orthodox presence at Taizé didn’t last long, they dissolved it rather soon, so next she was sent to the U.S., where, with the blessing of the Greek Archbishop Iakavos, she toured seventeen states, talking to ethnic Greeks and other Americans, to Orthodox and non-Orthodox. Unfortunately, we don’t have any tapes from these tours. I hope that some day they will materialize.

During this time, she was always at the side of someone who was mentally or physically ill, helping them to visit doctors and clinics. In this period of her life she accompanied many mentally ill people to psychiatric hospitals in Switzerland and other parts of Europe – Germany, France. In England, she met Father Sophrony in Essex and he asked her to take charge of the sisters in his monastery, but she didn’t because she knew she was never supposed to be tied to anything. Then she went to Africa (as a nun, of course), then, to Germany with the Greek Metropolitan Irenaeus, who is now in Crete. (During the years of the junta [military dictatorship] in Greece they exiled him to Germany and she was with him, first in Germany and then in Africa.) Then she went again to India with Fr. Lazarus Moore of the Russian Church, who lived his last years in Alaska.

In the 1980’s she had a house in Athens which a priest had given her, sort of a hostel for students, and that is where Greeks from all over the world came to visit her: monks, nuns, priests, archpriests, lay-people, and among them, happily, I was there also. I was given the opportunity to find the

Church through her: she was a door through which you could enter. The first thing she did was to send me to Holy Confession, that was how it all started. After I came to live with her we went to Aegina, where she fell sick with cancer of the lymph glands. She had Hodgkins' disease, so we came back to Athens to await her end, but the Lord did not want her to end then. Such a miracle, I have never seen such a miracle! One morning on Holy Saturday, she came back from church after liturgy and the swollen glands in her neck had disappeared! I was dancing in the middle of the room! I cannot express such joy – when you realize that God is so very alive. We tend to forget His real presence, but something like this miracle reminds you that He is there and that His love never ends. So, she was healed, and we went to Leros where she lived another two years, and then in 1992 – to heaven. She left this life in Leros.

I have given you a sequence and dates, but her life was not about going here or there, it was her inner and outer experience that was important.

Guidance and Direction

RTE: Three of the main themes of Mother Gavriilia's life are her poverty, her obedience to God, and her love. One important question is – how was she sure that her inner voice was from God? That is something that all of us struggle with, "Is this really guidance from God, or is it my imagination?"

SISTER GAVRILIA: If you have your spiritual father on the other end of the line, you call him. If he is in the same city, you go straightaway. But if you are not, let's say you are in China and he is in Greece, the first thing you must do is pray, "If this is my imagination, Lord, let it be clear that it is not Your will, but only my imagination." Second, what have you received as a direction? Is it alright with the Gospel? Is there a sense of pride that has entered your heart by doing this? That was not the case with Mother Gavriilia. She corresponded with her spiritual fathers continually when she was away from Greece.

In her early life in London, Metropolitan Iakovos Virvos of Thyatira was her spiritual father; later it was the well-known elder of Patmos, Father Amphilochos Makris. The moment Fr. Amphilochos left this world, she received a letter from Father Lev Gillet, and then he became her spiritual

father. She was not even a week without a spiritual father. Because Mother Gavrilia had a very long life, her spiritual fathers naturally left this world, so she had several. When I met her she had Father Agathangelos Michaelis, the one who gave her the flat in Athens. Later, when we left for Aegina and then for Leros, we had Fr. Dionysios Microyannanitis (he was my spiritual father too) from Little St. Anne's Skete on the Holy Mountain. He was her last. But she would always check and countercheck her "inner" guidance.

Besides checking with your spiritual father, and the Gospel, you can ask yourself, "Do you feel anxious?" If so, this is not from God. But the first rule is the best, ask your spiritual father.

RTE: And Mother Gavrilia was tonsured a schema-nun by Father Amphilochos Makris?

SISTER GAVRILIA: Yes.

RTE: Even before I got to the chapter in the biography that mentioned him, I thought how much they were kindred spirits. They both had a strong desire to help people, for mission.

SISTER GAVRILIA: When he first saw her, she was with Sister Thomais who is now in New Zealand. He opened his arms to them and said, "I was praying to God for nuns like you to come so that I could send them out." His monastery of Evangelismos on Patmos was fundamentally a missionary monastery.

Mother Gavrilia in India

RTE: I'd like to talk now about her experience in India as an Orthodox Christian. How did Mother Gavrilia relate to Hindus, especially those she worked with in the ashram's leper colonies?

SISTER GAVRILIA: She did not live in the ashrams with the Hindu monks and nuns, she worked in the dispensaries of the ashrams. But she was a person who in a godly way accepted everyone. God does the same by accepting us. Even if we are atheists, He brings His rain and sun, and she did the same. You could be Moslem, Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist, atheist, whatever, and she accepted and loved you. At the same time, she could see Christ deep

in your soul, Whom you yourself were not yet seeing. She said that whoever respects the other person is really respecting Christ in his own heart. So, that is how she was with the Indians and how she was with us, exactly the same – but as I said in the book, her call was for the “lost sheep.” Her work was to help western spiritual seekers turn back to Christ.

RTE: How did she do that?

SISTER GAVRILIA: Only by her presence. She was not a preacher, she was a loving person who gave the greatest lesson of all – an example, a paradigm. The young who met her saw a person who was not there because she wanted to become Hindu. She was working with the sick and poor, she was humble, she was patient, she was loving, she was all the good things that Christ wants from us, and they wondered, “What is she doing here?” That was the reason she was there, to make all these people turn back to Christ.

There is one very unique story about a young Australian man, Alan, who was already a Hindu when he came to India to tape-record his guru, Sivananda. God permitted him to be disenchanted, and that was the moment at which, in a very wise manner, Mother Gavrilia slowly, slowly led him back. Finally, Alan was baptized by Father Lazarus Moore and became an Orthodox missionary himself.

RTE: There were others, too, I imagine.

SISTER GAVRILIA: Yes, many others, and the most impressive cases are the atheists. I saw so many young people come to this house in Athens, along with freemasons, new-agers, karate practitioners, everyone – God worked wonders.

RTE: How did Mother Gavrilia keep her spiritual life whole without falling into religious syncretism, particularly in a foreign culture saturated with Hinduism? I imagine that while trying to make others feel comfortable or to be more a part of things, it would be easy to accidentally go too far.

SISTER GAVRILIA: She had very deep roots in Orthodoxy and her family were all believers. Ever since she was a child she had these roots. It is more difficult to become a religious syncretist if you have a religion passed to you from your father and grandfathers than if you have no roots. This is the reason why I think she never fell on the wrong side of syncretism. She loved

everyone, she made everyone feel comfortable. She did not have a critical eye, nor was she always thinking, “You are wrong.” She never did that.

RTE: She was so rooted in Christ...

SISTER GAVRILIA: ...that she was in no danger. We all have spiritual pride, “I am Orthodox,” or, for the other, “I am a Moslem.” You cannot wound the other’s pride, hurt this pride, and expect results. You must go very gently and lovingly – not gently as a means of diplomacy, but out of real love. Then the other will come to realize that he is missing something. He would like to have what you have. “Let me know what you know. Show me, what is the reason that you are calm, faithful, without anxiety...?”

RTE: Did she ever try to talk to the Hindus themselves about the difference between their many gods and Christ? Obviously, she wouldn’t have done it in an overly-zealous evangelical way.

SISTER GAVRILIA: She waited, like a true disciple of Christ Who said, “To the one who asks, give.” You don’t give if you aren’t asked, because if I ask you for something this means I need it and I am ready to accept it and understand it. If you go around preaching without my asking you, I’ll say, “Let her talk, I don’t care.” I won’t pay any attention to what you say. So, she was waiting for questions to come from the Hindus. She never just handed out Gospels, she waited to be asked. And she also gave the *Imitation of Christ* by Thomas à Kempis because she said there were many references there to the Gospel.

At one point when she was working in the dispensary of the ashram of Sivananda, his disciple, Chichananda, became angry in a public lecture and lost his calm. He was very sorry for this, and later said to her, “Did you hear what happened to me? Is there any book you can give me?” He was looking at her as a person who had a kind of asceticism and spirituality. He did not know this kind of Christianity. He knew the other – the active, the social, the missionary schools of other denominations. So she gave him the *Philokalia*. He was quite impressed, and the next thing he did was to visit Mount Athos. A Hindu monk, can you imagine?

RTE: Wonderful. You’ve said that Mother Gavrilina saw many people come to India seeking gurus. What did she think was the effect of eastern spiritual practice on western Christian souls?

SISTER GAVRILIA: She said that Hindu spirituality is alright for Hindus, but the Western European or American who goes there as a seeker has a characteristic which the Hindus and their fathers and grandfathers don't have – a certain amount of spiritual pride. "I want to become a Hindu because I want to be different from my friends back in France, in Italy, in the States." She said, "They come and dress in the orange robes, grow beards and do this or that, but there is this unfortunate temptation to pride and that is why many of these western young people who go to Indian ashrams end up in psychiatric clinics." In Hindu philosophy, the guru, the spiritual father, is the avatar, he is thought to be God Himself. So, you can understand how sad she felt about these young people. She said, "Instead of putting another human person in the place of God, you should put God there."

RTE: Mother Gavriilia never met Mahatma Gandhi because he died before she arrived in India, but several times in the book you mention that she appreciated him. Do you know why?

SISTER GAVRILIA: Because he had the Sermon on the Mount at his bedside and he read it every day. His philosophy was non-violence and she deeply respected both Gandhi and Martin Luther King because they never used violence against the violent. They reacted with non-violence and this is the miracle of love. If you beat on a person's pride they will never become your friend, but if you accept him with love and don't become aggressive with him you will win. Millions of Indians were freed from British rule through this.

Working with Protestants

RTE: When she was on her speaking tours to the U.S., we can imagine what she said to the Orthodox and to her fellow Greeks, but how did she relate to Protestants?

SISTER GAVRILIA: You know, we each belong to a blood group, A, B, AB, or the universal O. I think she belonged spiritually to O. She could talk and be understood by many spiritualities. So, if she could relate to Moslems and Jews, how much more with Roman Catholics and Protestants! In the book is a story about how she gave a lecture on the Mother of God to Protestants. Can you imagine? It was a great success. She had a way. Love will guide you what to say and how to say it.

RTE: Could you tell us a little about her meeting with Martin Luther King? This is particularly important for us Americans because of the slowly growing interest in Orthodoxy in the African-American community. It would add another dimension for them to know that a Greek nun like Mother Gavrilia spent time with Martin Luther King.

SISTER GAVRILIA: All I know is that they were acquainted, because otherwise I cannot explain how she became friends with his mother and his widow, Coretta. She knew them all personally.

RTE: Did she work with them?

SISTER GAVRILIA: No. At the time she knew them she was accompanying a blind Haitian to the U.S. for medical treatment, and also a blind and deaf girl from Athens who was looking for a school. That was when she met Martin Luther King. She also knew Rose Kennedy. But she had a very deep respect for King's non-violence.

RTE: So, after she was tonsured she didn't just settle down in a monastery for good? She kept following her inner voice?

SISTER GAVRILIA: She was first a novice in Bethany, and then she received the invitation and blessing of the Ecumenical Patriarch to go first to Constantinople, and later to Taizé and onwards. She never went on her own. She was a free person in her heart, but on the outside she was in the Church. That is the difference.

RTE: When she went back to India after her tonsure, how did the Indians and the western Protestant missionaries she knew respond to her?

SISTER GAVRILIA: She was afraid that she would lose her friends, but the exact opposite happened, because her Indian friends said, "Now you are a nun, we are monks, and we are even closer than before." The western Protestant missionary, Stanley Jones, invited her on that American tour as a nun. And do you know why? Because he saw her *kombeskini* [prayer rope] and said, "Oh, can you come with me and explain to Protestants about the prayer rope?"

RTE: It is a good lesson for us not to avoid talking to other Christians about such things, because they are often more open than we expect.

SISTER GAVRILIA: Yes, and you know what else? We are all thirsty. Even if we don't intellectually know it, we are thirsty for truths that belong to our heritage. Even if we are Protestant, something inside of us knows that we have a common heritage. Protestantism came in during the 15th and 16th centuries, but we had many early centuries before that of a common heritage. Why do we dismiss it?

Now, I am living in Leros and in the summer thousands of tourists come. Before writing the book about Mother Gavrilia, I was a more typical nun, and I had an obedience to paint icons. I studied icon painting and read many books about the theology of icons. Now, when I meet a tourist – usually in one of the churches – I ask them where they are from, but I don't ask from what church. Instead, I begin speaking about icons – the icon is one of the strongest missionary tools of Orthodoxy. However, the number one missionary tool is the liturgy. You don't have to understand a word, just be soaked in the liturgy. After that comes the icons, the incense, the candles, all the rest. In past centuries we had to go out of our country to meet people of other beliefs. Now, these people come to us. Tourism is a great missionary tool because it brings people to your home. It gives the opportunity, in a loving way – I insist, in a loving way, never as a preacher because then you will cause pain – to show them the riches that are common to us all.

Mother Gavrilia and Obedience

RTE: In the book, Mother Gavrilia speaks of obedience and says, “What is the good of obeying if you do not love? What is the use of being a lifeless robot? What is important is to love.” Can you enlarge on this?

SISTER GAVRILIA: Yes, here is the word “obedience,” and the word “discipline.” Many people mix these two words. It is one thing to be obedient, another to be disciplined. To be disciplined is like the soldier who says, “Yes, you've ordered it and now I will go to the top of this hill and kill three thousand people, and I will come back.” The feeling of love is not present in this. The most compelling example of obedience is our Lord, Who came to earth in obedience to His Father. “Obedient,” as St. Paul says, “unto the death on the cross.” When you are obedient you must keep in mind that the word obedience has love inside of it.

This is true even if you take it out of the context of the Church and put it into the context of two young people in love. One wants to do whatever the other wants, “Let’s go to the movie.” “Yes, let’s go.” Or, “No, let’s go to the mountains.” “Yes, let’s go hike.” You want what the other wants, even before you know what he wants. So, the faithful person is the one who wants what God wants. This is the whole difference, and this is what Mother Gavrilia meant. I can be disciplined, but this is nothing. What is essential is to be lovingly obedient. When you know that your Heavenly Father loves you, you can’t help but be obedient. When you know that your earthly spiritual father loves you, you want to do it. After I met Mother Gavrilia, she became my spiritual mother, and whatever she said, I did, not because I was disciplined but because I was lovingly obedient. So, if you have difficulty doing whatever your spiritual guide tells you, it means that there is not enough love in your relationship.

RTE: Just so. Along those same lines, Fr. Lazarus Moore, who was Mother Gavrilia’s spiritual father in India, said something very interesting, “Go anywhere you like, do whatever you like, so long as you observe the fasts.” This was one of her main practices?

SISTER GAVRILIA: Yes. When I met her I tried to begin keeping the fasts that the Church asks of us. Before that I’d had no idea of what fasting was about. I soon realized how wise it is because when you fast you have less energy, less adrenaline, less of all those things which help you survive in this modern world, so a lot of energy is directed towards otherworldly things. You are not so tied to what you are going to eat and drink. The first year I met her was just before Lent, and I tried the typical monastic tradition – which is not for lay people – of not eating or drinking for the first three days of Lent. I was full of enthusiasm, almost a zealot, so I fasted for these days. I was not on this earth, I was somewhere else. I had the feeling of no gravity, nothing. So, that was fantastic. Years later, I couldn’t do it any more because I became anemic after I became a nun, but still, this is a practice that is very wise. It helps you to see deeply into your own heart, to see a little further than this earth. It helps you to feel differently.

RTE: This is interesting because you expect that Fr. Lazarus would write about humility or prayer, instead of something so physical and simple.

SISTER GAVRILIA: Yes, and if you fast you also gain a sense of protection, as Fr. Lazarus explains. When you fast you have more protection against the enemy.

Giving God Priority

RTE: Another interesting quote is when Mother Gavrilia said, “If we wish to be good monastics we should at every moment give God priority and precedence over monasticism.”

SISTER GAVRILIA: Yes, because sometimes we tend to stop at the outer skin, the externals of monasticism, the typicon, “You wear this, you sit like this, you do this, you do that, you give priority to this or that.” This is what she meant when she said that at every moment we should give God priority over monasticism as a typicon, as a ritual. We read in the desert fathers, when one of the abbas was praying and someone knocked on his door, he opened it and pretended that he had not been praying. He received the brother and they talked, and after the brother left he continued to pray. Sometimes we monastics can fall into this trap, “I am a monastic and between three and four o’clock the door is closed.” This is what she meant. Of course, we obey certain rules, but we give priority to Christ.

RTE: And her door was always open?

SISTER GAVRILIA: She had her hours of seclusion, of course, but it was in the deep of the night. She was permanently invaded by telephone calls, up to eleven o’clock at night, but after eleven until the early morning, she was free. The essential thing is not to become a monastic, the essential thing is to become a Christian. That is the difference.

RTE: It seems to be a key to her whole personality that she never tried to make anyone change.

SISTER GAVRILIA: Never.

RTE: How did changes did come about in the people around her?

SISTER GAVRILIA: I will give you a very simple example. I remember many years ago an advertising film about laundry detergents. One woman washes

her clothes in a regular detergent, but they turn out grey or yellowed, so she asks the “wise woman,” the one who uses the “right” detergent, “Oh, how do you get your laundry so lovely?” We can change others by showing our very neat laundry. This is the way to make the other person say, “I want to become like you.” So, you see, you get a kind of enthusiasm in your heart – you want to become that which you admire. When I first met her I said, “Oh me, what am I going to do? I am so this, and this, and this (negative things). I want to become a little better...”

RTE: So, she inspired enthusiasm and questioning...

SISTER GAVRILIA: Yes, through loving acceptance. Through acceptance she made you realize your state, your awful state. Again, we can take the example of two people in love. You know, in Greek we say that the relationship of God to His creatures is *manikos eros*, “manic love,” and we can draw many conclusions from a young couple who are in love and want to marry. They always want to become better so that they will be more loved and accepted by the other. Our relationship with God is the same, we want to be better in front of Him because He is the pure white, while we are still greyed or yellowed. We want to be more worthy. Although no one is worthy, we want to be more worthy in our unworthiness. This is the only way to produce changes in others.

RTE: I also wanted to ask you about Mother Gavrilia’s understanding of spiritual motherhood and how she related to her spiritual children. I know that in Russia the good spiritual fathers give everything. Perhaps at first people are centered on the spiritual father if they haven’t had a strong experience of Christ, but, as they come into the Church, the spiritual father will gently wean them away from himself and towards Christ.

SISTER GAVRILIA: Wean is exactly the right word and I experienced it personally when the moment of my monastic call came. I had to leave. I was completely torn away, and she did it like every loving spiritual parent. The basis of her relationship with God and with us was the attitude you see in the icon of the three angels of the Holy Trinity – the Son and the Holy Spirit bowing their heads to the Father. Then Christ leaves, and at Pentecost the Holy Spirit says, “the Son”: He speaks about Christ. There is always this humble attitude of showing the Other. You know the actors on the stage, after the curtain has rung down and they come out to bow, everyone shows

the other. That is what we must do and this is what the spiritual guide, mother, father, must say, “I am not doing anything. God is doing everything.” We must become transparent so that through us, the other person will see Christ, not us. Definitely, not us.

RTE: Yes. She also made this wonderful statement. “Everyone should know and consider that his state is unique in the world and that no one has ever lived who is the same as he. For if there ever had been anyone the same as he, there would have been no need for him to exist.”

SISTER GAVRILIA: Yes, we are each unique. God is never out of imagination, out of combinations, and this is a big shock to our century, the century of cloning. Uniqueness is gone from history now, and people will be able to have copies of themselves. We are unique because our relationship with God is personal. It is not a mass relationship. We are not like the salt doll of Hinduism that said, “Who am I, what am I?” She arrived at the shore and, as she began walking into the sea, said, “Now, I know who I am,” as she dissolved into the ocean. We Christians emphasize the personality and the uniqueness of every person. We are not dissolving into the Divine like a divine soup. We retain our personhood and we can see this in the faces of the saints.

RTE: How did you see Mother Gavrilia supporting that individuality in the context of monasticism?

SISTER GAVRILIA: The flourishing communities in Greece are the ones where the abbots and abbesses respect the individual personalities and the gifts, where they give wings to the gifts of the monks and nuns, respecting them as they are instead of crushing everything so that they become robots, so that they are dependent only on them. Because God created us unique, each one with a different personality, who am I, if you have a gift in pottery, in music, to say, “No, you will become something else.” If I am an icon-painter, why should I be forced to do something else? God gave me this gift, I didn’t take it. So the flourishing communities are the ones which give wings to these talents and inclinations, and Mother Gavrilia was one of these. I also had the blessing to meet Fr. Sophrony of Essex. He was an artist himself, and he pushed the monks and nuns to develop their special gifts. Mother Gavrilia was the same.

New Converts; New Monasteries

RTE: One of the problems in the West is that many of the people going into monasteries are new converts. In trying to take on an Orthodoxy that is foreign to them, they often clothe themselves in rules and try to develop a “common mind” that ends up crushing souls.

SISTER GAVRILIA: If you don't want to be crushed, you shouldn't go into a crushing community. First, you should go live for some time in the community you are thinking of joining. Of course, on the surface it can look very democratic, but then on the fifth day or the fifth week we may discover certain small details, because God always permits small details to unveil a situation. If you find this community to be in accordance with your heart, you go there. If not, then you go somewhere else, because the same community that is difficult for one might be easy for another. Look at the faces of the other members. Are they dull, unhappy, without spiritual zeal, disenchanted? Of course, it is not easy to be together with one mind, one spirit, one heart, but we can choose the best.

The Orthodox world-view is a lovingly humble attitude towards the rest of the world. An attitude of prayer, of acceptance (up to a certain dogmatic point) of the «otherness» of the other, a state of non-judgment... it is the way of our Lord. He accepted all of the world, transfiguring it through His Love. I have met many converts who right away become the “judges” and “restorers” of their new creed.

Accept, respect, understand that in another few years, you will be doing the same things, if not worse. Acknowledge in your heart and be grateful for the blood of the martyrs that was shed so that you could enter the Church. Live in your heart the “Thy Will be done” in your everyday life. *Nothing* happens, not even that which happens in the Church, without His knowing and permitting it. Put your logic on the Cross, along with what you think is best. This is your last chance for real humility. As Mother Gavrilia used to say, “Only the proud are scandalized.” So, don't be.

RTE: I suppose that also holds true for converts picking parishes. In large cities, especially, there are sometimes several to choose from.

SISTER GAVRILIA: Yes, this is Orthodoxy, that we are free. We are free to choose our friends, our church, our spiritual father, our monastery. I think

it is St. John Climacus who says that one who is going to a monastery has to choose his own monastery, not even his spiritual father can choose it for him. Mother Gavrilia would say, "Alright, here is this and this monastery. You make a monastic tour and then we will discuss it." So, I went a few days here, a few days there. Your life is your own, and you must be at peace with it.

Bearing Destiny

RTE: Many Orthodox complain of the times, of the moral decline, and wonder what we can do to stop it. Here in your book, Mother Gavrilia says, "In our country social morality has changed and tends to resemble that of northern European countries. We cannot stop the trend, however. The ancient Greeks say, 'Should destiny bring you something, bear it and bear yourself well, for if you resent it you will cause grief to yourself and destiny will still bear you on.' Whether we like it or not we will swim with the current."

In the West we want to start a campaign, to do something about it. How would you look at that counsel of the ancient Greeks without feeling that you are somehow betraying Christianity by not stepping out and doing something?

SISTER GAVRILIA: No, no, you are not betraying it. What we should do at the same time, which is not written here in the ancient Greek proverb, is that we must pray first. But in the West, we want strikes, petitions. We should first kneel and pray for the groups of peoples, the youth, the doctors and nurses, all of the "endangered species" of our time. This is the one thing we don't do. We should celebrate holy liturgy for them. Next week I am invited to a liturgy sponsored by the Greek Medical Association. They have holy liturgy together, they pray together, because they are Christian doctors.

So, if we want to comment on this sentence about destiny, I think the context of her quote was on youth and promiscuity, and it is a very good example. We cannot fight promiscuity, but we should keep the door of our hearts open. Instead of saying, "You must do this, you can't do that," we can say, "I don't agree with you. I think you should do this or this," but in any case keep the communications open. If we close the channel the young person is lost and he will try to find comfort somewhere else, usually in his group of friends.

RTE: How did Mother Gavrilia keep that channel open, while letting the young people, in this instance, know that she didn't approve of some of their behavior?

SISTER GAVRILIA: She approached the subject in a positive way, by saying you should keep yourself clear, and not bruise and burn your "loving cells," your ability to fall in love, by having many partners. Otherwise, we will no longer be able to fall in love, to dream, and without being able to fall in love at the age of 20 or 25, what is left? How am I going to find the person with whom I will unite my life if I have lost the ability to love? So, this is a positive way of approaching the subject, instead of the ethical puritanism that simply decrees that you shouldn't do it. If you give me a reason why I should do something else, I may not change right away, but this will work in my mind in God's time. The seed will grow.

RTE: I was also touched by the letter she wrote to the grieving Greek mother whose daughter had become a Buddhist. She said, "I congratulate you on having such a wonderful daughter..." It was a good beginning.

SISTER GAVRILIA: Yes, it was positive, and why? The positive thing was that she was a sensitive, seeking girl. She was looking for something cleaner, purer, more meaningful in life than what she'd seen. So, it was, "I accept you. I congratulate you, but..." This is the positive way.

RTE: Mother Gavrilia also said, "The Lord calls us one by one," and that made me feel very sure that she didn't expect everyone to be like her.

SISTER GAVRILIA: She used to quote the sentence of Our Lord in the Gospel where He said, "You are the salt of the earth," and she used to add, "Did you ever see a mountain of salt? No, we put a pinch of salt here, a pinch of salt there. That is how it is divided on the earth. It is the minimum quantity required for the meat not to rot. We do not gather it into mountains. We are all personal small pinches of salt – we are not called as forty people, as one hundred. It could happen, but it is not the rule. The call is personal.

RTE: My last question... is there anything else you would like to say to our readers?

SISTER GAVRILIA: There is something I would like to add – because your journal's readers are often converts they should keep in mind that the

Church is a heavenly institution but the people who work in the Church are humans like you and me, everyday people. We should never be stopped by the disenchantment that will come. Disenchantment must come because this is a fallen world. I insist on this. God wants us to overcome the disenchantment and go on. We must never stop. I will tell you in closing an example that Mother Gavriilia used to give. “The Church is like a huge ship full of sailors, biting each other on the throat, tearing hair, punching, but the wonder is that the ship is coming into port because Christ is at the helm.”

And since we are talking to readers, some of whom may be new converts, I would also say, have patience and keep in mind the story of St. Anthony, when from his cave he saw a vision of the desert full of holes and traps. He said, “Oh Lord, who is going to be saved from falling into these traps?” Then he heard a voice, “Humility will save the people. The humble will never be trapped.” Although I was born Orthodox, I too was like a convert because I entered the Church at the age of forty – and when I saw what was going on in the Church I said, “No, it can’t be, why is this happening?” But it does happen, and God permits it so that I can overcome it and go ahead, not stop in despair. Jumping over hurdles is the road of a Christian. Never think that it is a walk on the beach in the moonlight. Have patience, that is all. ✦