

Mother Gavrilia: All-Pervading Love for Everyone



Mother Gavrilia (1897–1992) was a woman of action and prayer, of words and silent contemplation. She survived some of the most tumultuous events of

the 20th century: the expulsion of Orthodox Christians during the 1923 Greek-Turkish Population Exchange, the Battle of Britain, and the Greek Civil War. She was proficient in Ancient Greek, French, and English, the second woman ever to enroll in the University of Thessaloniki, and a physiotherapist trained in the United Kingdom. She spent her early retirement working with the poorest in India and was subsequently tonsured a nun in Palestine. She took part in missions in India, France, Greece, East Africa, Europe, the United States, and Sinai.

At age 80, she withdrew to full-time contemplation in Athens, then in Aegina, and finally on the island of Leros. She lived in abject poverty, accepting no money for her services, meeting everyone with love, and trusting God to provide. She claimed fluency in five languages: “The first is the smile; the second is tears. The third is touch. The fourth is prayer, and the fifth is love. With these five languages I go all around the world.”

Mother Gavrilia’s more than a hundred collected aphorisms advise us on how to live in God in the world. They are currently enjoying something of a “moment” on social media, where an aphorism often appears in a meme superimposed on one of her rare photographs.

It is a joy and nourishment for the soul when they pop up and we engage them. Let’s look here at just one, for what it says about us and about her: “*God loves your enemies as much as he loves you.*”

Logically, if we’ve been paying attention to our Bible and our Liturgy, this seems obvious: God is love; God loves everyone. Yet these ten words force us into a new perspective on our life as it relates to other people. What do they say about Mother Gavrilia?

She knew God. Not *about* God (she spoke often of the limitations of learned knowledge about him). She knew him through experiencing him in prayer and through life in the world. Which leads us to the next point:

She knew people as they really are. She knew that our broken lives are complicated, that relationships can be marred by hurt, bitterness, and hatred, and that life in Christ entails overcoming these. She learned this through her astute and loving encounters with others around the globe, including her many spiritual children. Which leads to the next point:

She loved pastorally. God may be the subject of this saying, but it is essentially an affectionate-but-searing rebuke. Through her life and her words, she showed the conviction that love, not fear, is the most effective motivator to redirect our lives. This isn’t a “soft” message: love by God or a true spiritual director can sting painfully. But as she practiced it—all-pervading and for all—it welcomes our smallest step toward the one who is love. ✱

Note: For a biography of Mother Gavrilia, see *Mother Gavrilia: The Ascetic of Love* (Katerini: Tertios, 1999), written by her disciple, Nun Gavrilia. Mother Gavrilia’s sayings can also be found online, for example at theorthodoxchurch.info/blog/articles/2010/03/the-life-and-sayings-of-mother-gavrilia/