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BUILD AND HEALS:
ASPECTS OF CURRENT DOCTORAL RESEARCH**

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SAINT GABRIEL OF MOUNT ATHOS, BISHOP OF VELIKA, THE MERCIFUL DOCTOR OF THE SICK. FULFILLER OF THE TEACHINGS OF THE HOLY GOSPEL

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Abstract:

God always cares about people and their salvation. Sometimes He Himself intervenes, sometimes He works through His saints. One of those holy men was Saint Gabriel of Mount Athos, Bishop of Velika, a humble monk and a great prayerful man. His life is filled with prayer, fasting and deeds. His love for prayer and for God will make him a merciful man who will immediately resort to prayer to help people in trouble. A great lover of the Holy Gospel and a follower of the Gospel teachings throughout his life. After his death, Saint Gabriel is a great miracle worker and a quick hearer of people's prayers.

Keywords: Saint Gabriel of Mount Athos, Bishop of Velika, teachings of the Holy Gospel, merciful doctor, love of neighbor, miracle.

Introduction

Describing the life of a saint is not an easy thing, and yet it has in itself a noble thing and a peculiar beauty. In one way a man who knew him personally would describe the life of the saint and in another way he who did not know the saint personally. The one who knew the saint personally, will write from a subjective perspective from his own experience at the moments spent with the holy person. The other person, although he will be more objective, cannot remain uninvolved personally in the wonderful life and deeds of the saint he describes. In both cases, the life of the same holy man will be described and his holiness will be confirmed. In our case, we will try to say a few words about the life and personality of St. Gabriel of Mount Athos, Bishop of Velika. This text will not be a scientific one, which with logical arguments will try to prove the sanctity and person of Saint Gabriel.

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because the Merciful God has already glorified this great ascetic, fasting and praying saint. This text will be more of a testimony to the holiness and greatness of Saint Gabriel of Mount Athos, or rather, a brief presentation of his life and personality to those who have not heard of him. We have the duty to bear witness to the saints whom God has glorified, so that more believers may be helped by their intercession before God. Although Saint Gabriel, the Bishop of Velika, was not a doctor by profession and is not among the holy doctors without money, he is still a great healer of diseases and a quick helper of those in need.

Short description of the life of Saint Gabriel of Mount Athos, Bishop of Velika

If it is necessary to choose words that will describe the life or deeds of a great saint, we will need many pages. This is also the case of our pious father Gabriel of Mount Athos, Bishop of Velika, who had a rich and humble spiritual life, devoted entirely to God. In the following lines we will briefly describe his life, so that we have an image of his person. This great luminary of God's grace was born on March 10, 1926, in the city of Shtip, in today's North Macedonia, in a pious family of craftsmen, receiving the baptismal name of Mialce. His parents, Metodi and Gora Parnagievi, were his teachers in Christian virtues, making him a lover of spiritual things and surrendering himself completely to God. He inherited faith in God, piety and prayer from his father, who every day, in the evening after the day's work and with his health deteriorating, prayed for two hours while standing. From childhood he caught the love of the ascetic life, preparing himself for the future needs and temptations.

He finished elementary school and high school in his hometown of Shtip. Since 1944, he participated in the national liberation struggle of the Macedonian people. For good behavior and good performance of obligations, he was proposed to become a member of the communist party of Yugoslavia. Because he went to church, he was not elected a member of the communist party.

After demobilization, he enrolled at the Faculty of Arts in Belgrade, where he frequently visited the church. Because of this, he was looked at with different eyes, but this did not bother the young Mialce to go to the Holy Liturgy every Sunday. After receiving his license, in 1955, he worked as a teacher of Art and Art History at the High School and Teachers' School in Shtip. For his pedagogical activity, he was recognized as the most capable pedagogue in Macedonia. Parallel to his service as a teacher, Bishop Gabriel

also worked as a sculptor. Although he lived during a time of severe atheism and communism, when the Church was persecuted, Father Gabriel attended daily services in the "Saint Nicholas" cathedral in Shtip, not wanting to give up God and prayer.

Considering that the time he spent in the world is royal time, calling himself to the evangelical words *give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and to God what belongs to God* (Mc. 12, 17), feeling the call to monasticism, in 1963 he left his homeland Macedonia, and looking for a deserted place for penance and prayer, he went to the garden of the Mother of God - the Holy Mount Athos. Father Gabriel's arrival in Mount Athos was not to the liking of the cunning devil who tried to expel him from there and break his ascetical and God-loving spirit. For example, he was not received with love in any monastery, because he came from Macedonia, where the local Church was fighting for autocephaly at that time. He was free to go where he pleased and to be received in monasteries only as a temporary guest. From time to time he had to go to Athena to ask for an extension of his stay on Mount Athos. Because he did not want to register under another nationality, he constantly had political problems with the authorities. When on two different occasions they wanted to exile him from the Holy Mountain, two wonderful things happened. In one case, fleeing from the authorities, he entered a cave, where a spider spun a web so large that it hid him from the eyes of his pursuers, and in the other case, he was protected by a multitude of snakes.

All troubles were borne with humility and meekness, thanking God for everything, not judging anyone, knowing that all temptations do not come from men. Making the decision to stay in the garden of the Mother of God, he lived in caves and under the open sky, passing from place to place. In this way he had the opportunity to meet many Athonite Abbots and great ascetical people, listening carefully to their useful advice. Struggling with great courage and going through many hardships, surrendering all his life and hope in God and the Mother of God, Father Gabriel overcame many Athonite monks in hardship and deserved much grace, with which God bestowed him. After many sufferings and troubles, the all-seeing God had mercy on him and handed him over to the spiritual care of the 84-year-old Russian monk Father Tatian Ivanov. After the death of Father Tatian, Father Gabriel inherited his cell and procured the necessary things from the neighboring monasteries. At the monastery "Saint Paul the Apostle" he was worthy to receive the monastic tonsure, with the angelic scheme, receiving the name of Gabriel.

The pious Father Gabriel could no longer stay at the Holy Mountain, being forced to return to his native land. He brought with him a large icon of

the Mother of God – You are worthy, thereby showing his great love for the Mother of God, the protector of Christians and monks. After coming to Macedonia, the pious father Gabriel practiced asceticism in several monasteries: “Holy Mother of God” in the village of Poboje - Skopje, “Holy Great Martyr Dumitru” – Markov monastery and at “Holy Mother of God” – Matka. During his stay at the Matka monastery, he often retreated to pray through the hills and caves near the monastery, away from people, but closer to the Savior Christ. In this monastery he was joined by his father, who received the name Cyril when he was ordained a monk. The father became the disciple of his own son, and the son, like a spiritual parent, mentored his father with humility and submission. In 1975, seeing the providence of God, they left the Matka monastery and settled in the monastery “Saint Gabriel of Lesnovo”, a famous monastery with a fruitful past, founded by the pious Gabriel in the eleventh century. In the same year, the father was appointed abbot of this monastery. There, with his father, they continued their severe hardships by fasting and vigil. The pious father Gabriel ate only dry, often moldy bread, and oil, eggs, milk and cheese were not touched. Only on Saturdays, Sundays and great holidays, in obedience to the orders of the Church and the canons, he taste a little oil from the candle with his finger. There was no bed in his cell, because the pious one rested on the ground for a while, and the rest of the time he fought with thoughts and demons.

The pious father Gabriel was also distinguished by his great love for the faithful people. Often, when he held all-night vigils, he gathered a large number of believers. To others he was always gentle and lenient, but to himself he was very severe. The faithful who came to him were taught gentleness, love, self-sacrifice, patience, faith and prayer, virtues in which Father Gabriel excelled and served as a living example.

Father Gabriel was also known in other Orthodox countries. He also had close relations with Father Emilian Simonopetrit, who wanted to make him abbot at one of the monasteries in Meteora. He was also sought to be an abbot at the hermitage dedicated to Saint Chariton the Confessor in Jerusalem. On the occasion of the preparations for the celebration of the 2000 years of Christianity, Father Gabriel corresponded with the then Queen of England, and with the then presidents of the USA and Russia, Reagan and Gorbachov.

Likewise, the holy and pious Father Gabriel had great love for the Holy Land. He went on pilgrimage several times to the holy city of Jerusalem, to the Tomb of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. He had a great desire to be a guard at the Lord's tomb, if only for a day. God heard his prayer and qualified

him to be the guard of the Lord's tomb for three months. He often said that he wanted to die in Jerusalem or on his way to Jerusalem.

On August 28, 1989, the pious father Gabriel, on the feast of the Dormition of the Most Holy Theotokos, was ordained a bishop with the title of Bishop of Velika. Through his ordination as a bishop, he became the shepherd of Christ's flock, which every day came to him for confession and sought spiritual teaching for the salvation of the soul. Many living witnesses testified to the holiness of his life and the great hardships to which he submitted. He had a ceaseless and fiery prayer, with which he helped many suffering souls. God also blessed him with the gift of foresight.

Saint Father Gabriel was not only a great ascetic and supplicant, but he was also an author who wrote poems and books. From him we have the following books (from what is published so far): a collection of poems "33 verses about Jerusalem", "The Holy Mountain – the heavenly country", "Before the greatest jubilee of man – 2000 years of Christianity on the threshold", "Miracles of the Most Holy Mother of God", "Rules and decisions of the Orthodox church about fasting", "Father Cherubim". Of course, the books are written in Macedonian, the mother tongue of Saint Gabriel.

The all-merciful God revealed to him the time of his departure to eternity, himself preparing everything for his burial and wrote on a piece of paper that the food should be prepared without oil. He called his spiritual sons to tell them that he was going to the Jerusalem above and that he would be with them again and wait for them there. So, holding the praying rope in his hand and having the Holy Scripture on his chest, on January 12, 1990, he quietly surrendered his soul to God whom he unconditionally loved and served. After he deceased, in the house of a spiritual son of his, from his photo that he gave him while he was alive, the holy myrrh began to flow.

After many testimonies about his earthly life, although his sanctity was never questioned, the Holy Synod of the Macedonian Orthodox Church – Ohrid Archdiocese, unanimously, with Decision no. 53 of 2017, introduced him to the Diptychs of the pious and God-bearing Fathers who pleased God. On May 16, 2017, in the presence of His Beatitude Stefan, other Bishops of the Macedonian Orthodox Church and a part of the monks and priests, the exhumation of the holy relics of Bishop Gabriel of Mount Athos began. According to the Orthodox tradition, they were washed with wine and holy oil and were temporarily placed in the chapel dedicated to Saints John the Baptist and John the Theologian at the Lesnovo monastery. On Sunday, 28.05.2017, in the cathedral of "St. Nicholas" in Shtip, where Saint Gabriel

of Mount Athos was baptized and went to services, his long-awaited canonization began¹.

The merciful doctor of the sick

Saint Bishop Gabriel of Mount Athos is also known as a great miracle worker. Many are the miracles performed by him during his life, after his dormition and after he was canonized at the Lesnovo monastery where his relics are also located. Many believers and pilgrims from other countries receive relief, mercy, joy and healing after worshipping the holy relics of Saint Father Gabriel and after the prayers raised to him. None who came in faith and repentance to his relics returned without peace, joy, and healing. During his earthly life, but also after his dormition, Saint Father Gabriel was always "merciful to his neighbors"² and a great healer of diseases. In his Akathist he is called the "merciful doctor of the sick"³, because he quickly answers the prayers of the sick from various diseases. The "miraculous healing of the deaf-mute child"⁴ is noted, a healing that Saint Gabriel performed during his lifetime, after the end of the Holy Liturgy at the Lesnovo monastery. When there was a great drought, the villagers of the village of Lesnovo came to Father Gabriel to ask him to help them with his prayers. After his prayer, Saint Gabriel "unexpectedly sent rain on the earth and saved the inhabitants of Lesnovo from poverty"⁵. Another testimony to his prayer of fire and its power is when praying in the church of the monastery, "a terrifying sign in the form of a pillar of fire appeared from the heavens, in the place in the church where you prayed on your knees to the Mother of God for the whole world"⁶, the Saint's Akathist tells us. That Saint Gabriel of Mount Athos, Bishop of Velika is a "quick helper in trouble"⁷, is confirmed by the monk fathers who live today at the monastery and are direct witnesses to the miracles performed by the pious Saint, who collect the testimonies of the faithful about his miracles. Another miracle confirmed after the Saint's death was the restoration of his spiritual son's sight⁸. He also healed a mute boy after his parents bowed and

¹ This brief description of the life of Saint Gabriel was taken from the book *Житие и акатист на светиот Гаврил епископ Велички Светогорец*, Брегалничка Митрополија, Штип, 2017.

² *Житие и акатист на светиот Гаврил...*, p. 60.

³ *Житие и акатист на светиот Гаврил...*, p. 60.

⁴ *Житие и акатист на светиот Гаврил...*, p. 61.

⁵ *Житие и акатист на светиот Гаврил...*, p. 62.

⁶ *Житие и акатист на светиот Гаврил...*, p. 63.

⁷ *Житие и акатист на светиот Гаврил...*, p. 65.

⁸ *Житие и акатист на светиот Гаврил...*, p. 67.

prayed at his grave, and after they left the church the boy spoke his first words. Many children will also say their first words after the dormition and after the canonization of Saint Gabriel of Mount Athos, Bishop of Velika. One of these children is the little girl Ana, whose name the Proto-singhel father remembered, who then, before the year 2017 (before the canonization), being 6-7 years old, after the prayers read at the tomb of Saint Gabriel and in the interior of the monastery church, she uttered her first words despite the doctors' diagnosis that her would never speak. The author of this text, in the year 2022, being the companion of a group of pilgrims, participated in the confession of Father Proto-singhel Isac, hieromonk at the Lesnovo monastery, who told that a bus with pilgrims from Serbia came to Saint Gabriel, all of them sick with different diseases. After worshiping the holy relics and praying, also participating at the Holy Liturgy, they all went home, cured of the diseases they suffered from. Every year pilgrims and believers from Serbia come to the Saint's relics to ask for healing and they receive it. Saint Father Gabriel, Bishop of Velika, being quick to help in need and trouble, after the sincere prayers of the faithful, helps to cure various diseases, including leukemia, cancer, soul diseases and helps childless couples to acquire them and many others. It is no wonder that "a river of healing flows from his ark"⁹, and that "all who come for help receive healing of infirmities of soul and body"¹⁰.

It is also worth mentioning the most publicized miracle of St. Gabriel, from the year 2015. A girl named Lora, then in the eighth grade, suddenly her toes became crooked and the girl could not walk or to stand up. A number of 120 doctors from the country and abroad confirmed that the girl was healthy, that she did not have any disease or condition specific to a disease, and they could not explain what she had. On the feast of the Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ in 2015, Lora was brought by her parents to the monastery in Lesnovo. Prayers were read at the tomb of Saint Gabriel and after anointing Lora with the oil from the tomb candle, she was miraculously healed. Today, Lora is a student at the Faculty of Medicine in Skopje. In the same year, 2015, the cross from the tomb of Saint Gabriel released a strong smell of myrrh. A lady who had bladder cancer also came to the monastery, asking fathers to read her a prayer before the operation near the relics of Saint Gabriel. The lady went to the surgery on the scheduled day, after waking up from anesthesia, the doctor who operated on her was sitting next to the hospital bed

⁹ *Житие и акатист на светиот Гаврил...*, p. 68.

¹⁰ *Житие и акатист на светиот Гаврил...*, p. 68.

telling her that she did not have any cancer, she was clean and healthy. Also, the wife of a priest in Skopje knew Saint Gabriel personally, the bishop of Velika, often going to the monastery since she was a girl and the saint was alive. Two or three years ago, the lady was diagnosed with a tumor in the uterus and scheduled for surgery. Before the operation, she went with her husband to the monastery to pray and have prayers read to her near the relics of Saint Gabriel. After the surgery, the surgeon said he found no tumor in the uterus, but the shape was still visible where the tumor was before.

Saint Gabriel, the fulfiller of the evangelical teachings

Saint Gabriel, the Bishop of Velika, being a great worker of miracles, was also a great fulfiller of the evangelical teachings. Loving the Savior Jesus Christ and the Mother of God, he could not help being a fulfiller of the evangelical teachings, because he loved the Holy Gospel very much and read it every day. We consider that he fulfilled all the evangelical teachings written in the Holy Gospel. Regardless of where we begin with the text and teachings of our Savior Jesus Christ and the teachings of the Holy Apostles, we will find in the life of Saint Gabriel a reference that a teaching was appropriated and fulfilled. For example, if we start with the beatitudes, we will see that they have been fulfilled to a great extent. Saint Gabriel of Mount Athos and Bishop of Velika, certainly fulfilled the first beatitude, of the poor in spirit (Mt. 5, 3; Lc. 6, 20), because all his life he was very humble and remained so until his dormition. He never showed even a little that he knew much, or that he prayed much, but always in humility and considering himself unworthy, he instructed his spiritual sons, or without being noticed by anyone he withdrew into the silence and beauty of prayer. Now we know that he inherited the kingdom of heaven for sure, because his humility was genuine. He also fulfilled the second beatitude, of those who cry seeking comfort (Mt. 5, 4; Lc. 6, 21). Saint Gabriel wept not only for the forgiveness of his sins, and he also wept for his persecutors on Mount Athos and then in his native land, as he also wept for his spiritual sons. He received the long-awaited comfort from God. For the third beatitude (Mt. 5, 5), Saint Gabriel inherited the heavenly kingdom for his gentleness with which he guided his spiritual sons to communion with God and which he demonstrated throughout his life. Going towards the fourth beatitude (Mt. 5, 6), the Saint experienced many injustices done against him and his father, but enduring those injustices he received as a gift many gifts and grace from God. The fifth beatitude, that of charity (Mt. 5, 7; Lc. 6, 36), shows us the Holy Father Gabriel as a very merciful man and fulfilling this beatitude. If after the first beatitude, Saint

Gabriel was poor in spirit (humble), we must mention that he was also poor materially, often not even having the necessities of life. Although he was materially poor, he was also very merciful to all who asked for his help. He helped people sometimes with material things, but mostly with his prayers. And now he continues to be merciful to everyone who crosses the threshold of the Lesnovo monastery and prays and bows before his relics. And the sixth beatitude we are sure was fulfilled by Saint Gabriel, that of a pure heart (Mt. 5, 8). The saint cleansed his heart of passions and made it the abode of God. We do not know if he saw the Lord Jesus Christ, but we have testimonies that the Mother of God appeared to him twice during his life. In the same way, Saint Gabriel, bishop of Velika, fulfilled the following beatitudes, that is, those who make peace, those who are persecuted for justice and those who are reviled and persecuted for the sake of Christ (Mt. 5, 9-11; Lc. 6, 22). He was unjustly persecuted when he was at Mount Athos, he was persecuted by the communist authorities in his native country, and he was certainly reviled and offended simply because he was a simple Christian, a servant and an ardent suppliant of Christ. In these cases, Saint Gabriel applied the evangelical teaching of loving enemies and praying for his persecutors (Mt. 5, 44; Lc. 6, 27-28).

Likewise, Saint Gabriel did not gather any earthly treasure that could be lost at any time, but gathered heavenly treasures, as our Savior teaches (Mt. 6, 19-20). He never cared about what he would eat or what he would wear, he always had the minimum to live and always left himself in God's care as the Holy Gospel teaches (Mt. 6, 25-34). What we can learn from the Holy Father Gabriel is that he fulfilled the commandment to love God and his neighbor. He loved God with all his heart, with all his soul and with all his mind, and in loving God he also loved his neighbor. That is, he fulfilled the greatest command that the Savior Jesus Christ gave to us Christians, as it is written in the Holy Gospel (Mt. 22, 37-40; Mc. 12, 30-31). The commandment of the Savior to love one another indeed is a new one and Saint Gabriel respected it all his life. Loving his spiritual sons and all the people who came to him asking for prayers and spiritual advice, he shows us that he was truly a disciple of Christ and loved with the love of Christ (Jn. 13, 34-35). Saint Gabriel truly knew that God is love (1 Jn. 4, 8) because he loved God and his neighbors with all his heart. Through his own example, Saint Gabriel shows us how we should love ourselves and God, fulfilling the teaching of Saint John the Apostle and Evangelist (1 Jn. 4, 11). In the person of St. Gabriel of Mount Athos, the Bishop of Velika, the words of St. Apostle John the Theologian were fulfilled "God is love and he who abides in love

abides in God and God abides in him" (1 Jn. 4, 16). Because he loved much he was in God and God was in him through the grace and gifts of working miracles during his life and after his dormition. We can say that St. Gabriel, like St. Apostle Paul, was crucified with Christ, lived for Christ and Christ lived in him (Ga. 2, 20), becoming a bearer of Christ and His love for the world and people.

Living a harsh ascetical life, constantly showing his love for God and neighbor, Saint Gabriel, Bishop of Velika, certainly acquired the fruits or gifts of the Holy Spirit, described in the Epistle to the Galatians: "And the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, long-suffering, kindness, doing good, faith, meekness, self-control, purity" (Ga. 5, 22-23). He acquired love by showing, as I mentioned above, his love for God and neighbor. Wherever he went or when the faithful came to him, he spread the joy he had in his heart and soul. He always had an inner peace that was never distracted or disturbed by anything or anyone. He was known for the long-suffering that Saint Gabriel had, shown in prayer, in suffering and in general in his life. Kindness was like second nature to Saint Gabriel, never turning anyone down and helping people as he could, most often with his prayers. Saint Gabriel's goodness was closely linked to doing good to people who came to ask him for help, confirmed even today by the multitude of believers who receive help at his relics. Undoubtedly, he had the gift of faith since childhood, constantly developing it and having a very strong faith, which, being united with prayer, created many miracles for Saint Gabriel and for the people who came asking for help. Gentleness was a characteristic of Saint Gabriel, being a very gentle man, always severe to himself but always gentle and kind to others. Self-control and purity are also gifts of the Holy Spirit with which Saint Gabriel was gifted. His self-restraint cost not only in self-restraint not to eat oily food, but certainly much self-restraint in thought and still more in not speaking much. This self-restraint was also the reason for acquiring bodily and soul purity, crucifying one's passions and desires together with the body (Ga. 5, 24). Being gifted with the gifts of the Holy Spirit and living for Christ and in Christ, Saint Gabriel of Mount Athos, Bishop of Velika, sanctified himself and became a saint, resembling the holiness of God, as Saint Peter the Apostle exhorts us "Be holy, for that I am Holy" (1 Ptr. 1, 16), but also God Himself in the Old Testament (Lev. 11, 44; 19, 2; 20, 7). The holiness of Saint Gabriel, the Bishop of Velika, is also proof of the attainment of the perfection required by our Savior Jesus Christ (Mt. 5, 48).

Conclusions

Saint Gabriel of Mount Athos, Bishop of Velika, was a man who had faith and prayer acquired since childhood, which he kept throughout his life. The great love he had for God was reflected in all the things he did in his life, especially in his relationships with other people. The love of God sent him to the Holy Mount Athos, to look for a place where he could dedicate his life to God in peace, which he did not have, but the harsh life spent on Mount Athos helped him in his needs and in acquiring spiritual gifts. The needs and temptations will continue even after leaving Mount Athos. The humble and gentle father Gabriel will become a spiritual father to many people, guiding them on the path of salvation and helping them with his prayers. Although his holiness was felt by the people who came to him for help, Saint Gabriel managed through his gentleness and kindness to help them but not to stay too long around people. He preferred to be permanently in communion with Christ. The miracles he performed and continues to perform are evidence not only of Saint Gabriel's holiness but also of the closeness he had with the Savior Jesus Christ and the Mother of God, to whom he prayed and continues to pray. God gifted him with many gifts, including the gift of foresight and the gift of working miracles, the latter gift continuing even after his dormition. A great number of miracles are performed at his tomb and at his relics. Saint Gabriel became a merciful doctor of the sick of various diseases and a quick helper. All these rich gifts that Saint Gabriel was worthy of, are evidence for us Christians today of the love that God has for those who please Him and for those who love Him.

Through His saints, God shows us that He is with us and listens to their prayers when we Christians pray to them. Saints, including Saint Gabriel, Bishop of Velika, through their love for God and for us, continue to pray for us and help us by God's will when we are in need. Their holiness is testimony to the eternal life that we Christians wait for and long for, a testimony that death is not the end of our lives. Beyond our earthly life, we have the saints of God who pray for us and intercede for the mercy and goodness of our Lord and God Jesus Christ and of the Mother of God for us, being already glorified by God with holiness and the working of miracles. Let us enjoy this great gift of God, may he give us saints like Saint Gabriel the Bishop of Velika, who through his prayers helps the faithful to find health, peace, joy and to glorify God, the Source of good. Knowing more about the life and miracles of God's saints, we are entitled to say like the psalmist that "God is wonderful in his saints ... Blessed is God" (Ps. 67, 36).