

Lev Gillet (“A Monk of the Eastern Church”) and His Spiritual Father, Metropolitan Andrei Sheptytsky: An Analysis of Their Correspondence, 1921–1929

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Abstract

(Українське резюме на ст. 81)

By means of original research at the Sheptytsky archives in Lviv, the author uncovered a file of some seventy handwritten letters between Metropolitan Andrei Sheptytsky and his sometime spiritual son, Lev Gillet (“A Monk of the Eastern Church”), a file which sheds important light on the biographies of both of these influential churchmen and also on interwar history. This correspondence, dating from the first meeting of the two in 1921 through to Sheptytsky’s receiving of Gillet into the Studites and then Gillet’s entrance into Orthodoxy in 1928, is analyzed to reveal several key incidents in the decade, including: Ukrainian political aspirations after Poland took over Eastern Galicia; Eastern Catholic expansionism into former Tsarist territories; the questionable work of Michel d’Herbigny and Pius XI’s *Mortalium animos*; and the creation of Chevetogne. In addition, the letters reveal subtle developments in the thinking of both Sheptytsky and Gillet as well as their relations with such ecumenically significant figures as Dom Lambert Beauduin, Leonid Fiodorov, and the Orthodox pioneers of Saint Serge Institute in Paris. Even to the end of his life, Gillet referred to Sheptytsky as “my bishop” and the correspondence concludes with a poignant exchange as the son realizes the pain he is causing his father, but asks nonetheless for the freedom to follow his conscience – a move that might have been avoided had the

politics of “soteriological exclusivism” not been so severe at the time.



Introduction and Overview

In February 1992 while working in the recently de-classified archives of Metropolitan Andrei Sheptytsky, housed at the L’viv Branch of the Central State Historical Archives of Ukraine,¹ I discovered file no. 358/1/257 entitled *Листи від кореспондентів з прізвищами на літеру Ж* (Letters from correspondents with last names beginning with the letter Ж). The file held seventy hand-written letters and post cards in 184 folios penned by Lev Gillet to Sheptytsky between November 1921 and April 1929. Realizing the importance of my find, I immediately photocopied the entire file and subsequently

Abbreviations

Behr-Sigel = Elizabeth Behr-Sigel, *Un moine de l’Église d’Orient: Le père Lev Gillet* (Paris: Cerf, 1993)

Beatification Documents = *Postulatio Causae Beatificationis et Canonisationis Servi Dei Andreae Szeptycky, Archiepiscopi Leopoliensis Ucrainorum [sic] Metropolitae Halyciensis*, vol. 2, *Variae Epistolae et Relationes* (Rome, 1965)

Magocsi = Paul Robert Magocsi, ed., *Morality and Reality: The Life and Times of Andrei Sheptytsky* (Edmonton: Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies, 1989)

Korolevskij = Cyrille Korolevskij, *Metropolitte André Szeptyckyj – 1865–1944* (Rome: Opera Theologicae Societatis Scientificaе Ucrainorum, 1964)

Tretjakewitsch = Léon Tretjakewitsch, *Bishop Michel d’Herbigny SJ and Russia: A Pre-Ecumenical Approach to Christian Unity* (Würzburg: Augustinus-Verlag, 1990)

¹ Центральний Державний Історичний Архів, М. Львів.

arranged to have it transcribed. While containing, as might be expected, a certain amount of now irrelevant material, the correspondence also includes facts, interpretations, and ideas that shed light on key dimensions of Gillet's and Sheptytsky's biographies, not to mention other aspects of inter-war Church history.

Sheptytsky and Gillet first met in England during the former's trip to that country in 1921. At the time Gillet was a junior Roman-Rite Benedictine monk. On November 30, 1921, Gillet addressed his first letter to the metropolitan, which was followed by another eight before he made his first trip to Galicia, where he spent a short time in L'viv, and the rest of his nine-month stay at the Studite monastery in Univ.² It was there that Sheptytsky received him into his Studite community and ordained him to the priesthood. By June 1925 Gillet is back in Western Europe and pens another eleven letters to Sheptytsky before returning to Galicia in the autumn of 1926 for another visit of three and one-half months. Ten more letters followed Gillet's return to Western Europe until he visited Galicia again from February to May, 1927.

Subsequent to this trip, Gillet writes another twenty-two letters, and in December 1927 returns to L'viv for what was apparently a brief stay of only two weeks. This fourth journey to L'viv was to be his last, and it was followed by fourteen more letters to Sheptytsky before he entered into communion with the Orthodox jurisdiction of Metropolitan Evlogii Georgievsky in June, 1928. Two final letters date from the period after his reception into Orthodoxy.

Gillet also met with Sheptytsky on several occasions between 1922 and 1926 when the metropolitan travelled to Rome and other Western European cities.

As might be expected, Sheptytsky in turn wrote to Gillet, and from the latter's correspondence one can deduce that the Metropolitan had sent him at least fourteen communications. Curiously, however, the Beatification Documents, prepared by the postulator for Sheptytsky's cause back in the 1950's and 60's, contain only two letters to Gillet, the tenth letter and the

² References for specific letters are provided below in the section entitled "The Individual Letters."

penultimate one,³ in which Sheptytsky frantically attempts to dissuade Gillet from continuing on his path to Orthodoxy. (More on this below). Were the other twelve letters never provided to the postulator's office, or were they intentionally excluded? (Again, we shall return to this question below).

In sum, the nine years treated in this correspondence cover the period when Gillet went from being a Benedictine monk, to theology student at San Anselmo's in Rome, to Studite candidate and private secretary to Sheptytsky in Ukraine, to general liaison for projects sponsored by Sheptytsky in Western Europe (in particular those related to his Russian apostolate), to social worker-hieromonk in Nice, to unattached hieromonk, to resident at St-Serge Orthodox Institute in Paris.

In Sheptytsky's life, this period coincides with his desperate attempts on behalf of Ukrainian political aspirations after the Polish take-over of Eastern Galicia, the almost euphorious plans for Eastern Catholic expansion into formerly Tsarist territories, the marginalization of Sheptytsky's Russian Catholic Exarchate and unionistic work in general by key Vatican officials, in particular Michel d'Herbigny,⁴ and the rise of suspicions concerning his Catholic loyalties especially after the publication of Pius XI's tragic encyclical, *Mortalium animos*.⁵

Thus, the period is among the most important in both Sheptytsky's and Gillet's lives. In the case of the former it coincides with the stage in his life when he had gained stature as a result of his imprisonment by Tsarist authorities and was still healthy enough to engage in a host of activities. In the case of the latter it is the period of gradual transition from Roman to Orthodox communion.

³“Lettre de Mgr Sceptyzy [sic] adressée au R.P. Gillet, en date du 23 février 1928”; and “Monastère d'Univ 26. V. 28.,” Beatification Documents, fols. 58 verso to 60 verso.

⁴For a recent, book-length study of d'Herbigny, see Tretjakewitsch.

⁵*Acta Apostolica Sedis* 20 (1928): 5–16

The Individual Letters

Gillet's first letter to Sheptytsky (November 30, 1921), in which he expresses his hope to join Sheptytsky's Eastern apostolate, provides a sense of how gradual his evolution towards Orthodoxy was: in referring to a Serbian Orthodox liturgicon, he places "Orthodox" in quotation marks⁶ (84 r), a then common practice among Catholics who believed that those not in communion with Rome misappropriate the term. He demonstrates a profound devotion to Saint Josaphat (Kuntsevych) and suggests that the Basilian and Benedictine traditions share a significant commonality (*ibid.*). He also writes that "the reunion of Russia and the Slavic countries with the Church, principally by means of the Greco-Slavic rite, is my great object of intercession" (83 v). Incidentally, Newman and Soloviev are for him the most attractive churchmen of the nineteenth century (*ibid.*). And in terms of national questions, at this time Gillet is still writing of Kiev as part of "medieval Russia" along with Moscow and Novgorod (84 r).

More generally, this first letter reveals a profound piety permeated with the spirit of self-abnegation and obedience, qualities evident throughout this correspondence, not to mention Gillet's life as a whole.

Three and one-half months later, Gillet is in Rome studying theology, and it is here that he first makes the acquaintance of key Vatican figures like Michel d'Herbigny and Cyril Korolevskij.⁷ There he begins his study of Slavonic and Russian, and starts noting the differences between Russians and "Ruthenians" (87 r).

Gillet writes that he would be honoured and overjoyed to serve as a Studite in a Slavic land, and that he is willing to die for the cause (86 v). A sense of post-Tsarist euphoria and near megalomania surfaces in his remark that this Eastern apostolate would have a marvellous future if it could revive the life of the Kievan Caves Monastery, the Troitsko-Sergeevska Lav-

⁶ References to the folio numbers (recto and verso) of Gillet's letters will appear in the body of our text.

⁷ For a brief biography of Korolevskij (né Jean-François Charon), see Korolevskij, vii-xxvi.