

For charity pray we all to God with God's working, thanking, trusting, enjoying. For thus will our good Lord be prayed to, as by the understanding that I took in all his own meaning and in the sweet words where he saith full merrily: 'I am the Ground of thy beseeching'.²



ST NILUS, A SPIRITUAL DIRECTOR OF THE FIFTH CENTURY

BY

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THOUGH the term 'spiritual director' is of modern origin, the vocation it denotes is very old. Wherever men have devoted themselves to the pursuit of perfection they have felt the need for guidance from someone more experienced than themselves. Even among those remarkable old monks and hermits that peopled the deserts of the eastern part of the Empire from the fourth century onwards, St Nilus is an outstanding figure. Perhaps his most striking characteristic is his gift for spiritual direction in the full modern sense of the word. The old legend that made him a high official at Constantinople who left the court late in life in order to become a hermit on Mt Sinai agrees ill with this office of a spiritual guide as he is represented in his many letters and several weighty treatises. But this ancient story is no longer accepted by scholars; according to their general opinion we have to think of St Nilus as the experienced superior and novice master of a monastery at Ancyra in Galatia. This is the evidence of his own writings. His great reputation caused many works to be falsely attributed to him; among them the famous *Peristeria*, the source of the legend; and the *De Oratione* which really belongs to Evagrius Ponticus. Hence the material for the presentation of his spiritual teaching will be taken from those works which modern critics acknowledge as authentic, particularly from the *Tractatus de Voluntaria Paupertate ad Magnam*, *Liber de Monastica Exercitatione*, *De monachorum Praestantia*, and the *Letters* the great majority of which are generally held to be genuine.¹

The impression these writings leave on the reader is one of sur-

² Page 244 of the Orchard Series Edition of the *Revelations*, prepared by Dom Roger Hudleston. This text is more accurate in some respects.

¹ All these works are in Migne, P.G., 79, to which volume the following citations refer.

prising modernity. There is little of terrifying mortifications and other spiritual 'athletics' but a good deal of sound commonsense. For St Nilus as for St John of the Cross the way that leads to perfection is the way of detachment, and first of all of detachment from material things. 'Let us therefore begin to leave behind the things that are present, let us despise possessions, money and all that absorbs thought . . . let us cast off the burden, so that the vessel may rise a little; overcome by the gale, let us throw overboard also much of the cargo, that the governing mind may be saved together with the thoughts that are sailing with it.' (*De Monastica Exercitatione*, 64, 797.) Without this foundation of detachment from external things no sound spiritual life is possible, for it is the uniform experience of all who give themselves to it seriously that all undue attachment upsets prayer. At the same time, prayer itself is the principal means of detachment for by it the soul learns where are her weak points, what are the things to which she still clings too much. The more she advances, the more severe become the demands made on her readiness to 'let go'. Attachments moreover give the devil his best opportunity to deceive man. 'How', St Nilus asks, 'can he who is burdened with a thousand worries fight against the demons who are free from all cares? The divine Scripture says, "The valiant man shall flee away naked in that day"' (Amos 2, 16)—the naked man, not he who is laden with heavy garments of worldly things; the naked man, not he who is prevented from running by the thoughts of material possessions; for he who is naked is difficult to catch and those who wish him ill cannot hold him.' (*Ibid.*, 65, 797D.)

These exhortations to detachment are addressed to religious, which means that they do not only refer to grosser attachments to great possessions, but also to the smaller but nevertheless very insidious ones that can be indulged in even in the monastic life. Detachment moreover has very wholesome psychological effects. Far from making a man bitter, as those might think who have never practised it, it makes him on the contrary carefree and happy. For 'the poor are not troubled by the desire of possessions, but are ready to leap and rejoice . . . because, being unconcerned with vanities, they can bring a free mind to obtaining the better things'. (*De Paupertate* 1, 969C.) This note of the joyful liberty of the friends of Christ, who 'dispose of the possessions of their Friend with boldness as they wish' (*Ibid.*, 19, 993B), precisely because they are detached from them, re-echoes throughout his writings; there is nothing tense or cramped in his teaching. There is to be liberty, not only from attachment to worldly possessions, but also from self-will; for like St John of the Cross, he knows well that there

are many pitfalls even in the seemingly good things of the spiritual life, especially in spectacular mortifications for which he evinces singularly little admiration. It was the golden age of the Stylites, when many 'spiritual' men and even a few women, attracted by the example of a few genuine saints, left the world for the platform of a pillar on which they spent their days often surrounded by admiring crowds.

This is how Nilus tells one of them what he thinks of his self-chosen vocation: 'Not he who commendeth himself is approved, but he whom God commendeth', and 'Whosoever shall exalt himself shall be humbled. But you who have performed no deed worthy of praise have exalted yourself on a high pillar in order to gain praises for it. But take heed lest having readily been praised for this by corruptible men you should, contrary to your expectation, be counted for nothing by the incorruptible God, because you have had more than your fill of human praise. . . . For it would be absurd indeed that one's body should be standing high up on a pillar, whilst one's mind, unwilling to be occupied with heavenly things, should be dragged down, chatting away pleasantly with women.' (*Letters*, 114 and 115, 249B,C.)

These external feats of mortification find very little favour in the eyes of the novice master of Ancyra, and even fasting, so highly thought of by many of the ancient monks, does not impress him much if not performed with prudence and under obedience. 'If we want to tread the devils under foot', he writes to a monk, 'let us show them humility in all things. Let us put away our own will and, as we gladly receive fasting if enjoined by our superiors, so also let us accept eating or drinking and temporary physical rest if advised to do so by those well able to judge nature in such matters; let us obey them willingly and without contradiction. For partaking of food from obedience castigates devils even better than fasting.' (*Letters*, 1, 307, 193B,C.)

In reading such well-known works as the *Lausiaca History* one is often tempted to think of the spirituality of the old eastern monks as very different from our own; so much of it seems concerned with eccentricities and externals. But these are only the features appealing then as now to the popular imagination; the underlying reality is very different and must be sought for in another kind of literature, less readily accessible but more concerned with the substance of patristic spirituality. For fasts and vigils, always somewhat spectacular if treated in spiritual literature, are indeed salutary, but unessential. If health demands they may be given up without its affecting the substance of the religious life. It is humility and obedience that make the monk; they can never be given up

or even suspended. They are moreover the infallible means of defeating the devil who loves to disguise himself as an angel of light and under pretext of an austere life incapacitates the body for useful work and leads the soul into pride, the deadliest sin of all. St Nilus is very outspoken on the subject and does not spare those monks for whom the very excellence of their way of life becomes a dangerous snare. 'The holy angels', he writes, 'imitating their Lord love humility. If therefore a monk, boasting of his exalted kind of life, indulges in pride and cannot be weaned from it, the angels leave the boaster and go far away; they will no longer help, guard and succour him as heretofore. But straightaway there come the wicked demons and make friends with him who is deprived of his blessed guardians and throw the proud man into fornication, or theft, or murder, adultery or any other forbidden thing. For the worst of all faults is pride—through pride the devil, the author of all wickedness, fell down from heaven.' (*Letters*, 1, 326, 200C,D.)

St Nilus, experienced spiritual director that he was, did not stop short at individual vices and imperfections but got down to fundamental difficulties. The state of perfection itself can become a snare; the monk may turn into a pharisee thanking God that he is not like other men. Therefore the more austere his way of life the more humble he must be 'lest vainglory should find a place in you, and you reap nettles instead of wheat and lose your labours.' (*Letters*, 2, 51; 221C.)

This temptation to pride feeds not only on asceticism but also on intellectual achievements. Thus he counsels a monk: 'Do not desire your superior to be eloquent, for it is not the eloquent who are pleasing to God. But seek to be subject unto the end even to an ignorant person, you, who in the opinion of the wise of the world are yourself wise, and you will be crowned with the most precious crown of humility and genuine obedience.' (*Letters*, 1, 34; 100A.) There are few more severe and efficacious tests of humility than the subjection of a higher intellect to a lower. It is comparatively easy to obey a superior whose wisdom one admires, but to be constantly submissive to one whose faculties seem inferior to one's own is a hard trial, but a trial that purifies the soul in her depths. And certain superficial minds will find it even harder than others and have to take special precautions. St Nilus has a word for them too. 'Constant reading and enjoyment of great words', he says, 'is not suitable for a man who is puffed up. For knowledge makes the empty-headed man conceited and befogs the proud as wine befogs him who suffers from fever. As long as the soul has not been purified of pride the demon continues to assault her. . . . But if you want him to turn back quickly, approach the unshakable tower of

humility, and armed with watchings, prayer and psalmody, you will see with your eyes the discomfiture of the enemy.' (*Letters*, 2, 58; 225B.) 'Watch ye: and pray that ye enter not into temptation.' (*Matt.*, 25, 41.) St Nilus repeats our Lord's injunction, so frequently forgotten, that to conquer temptation we must rely on God's strength not on our own; for it is by prayer and psalmody, that is by our personal converse with God and by the official prayer of the Church, that the divine power works and preserves man from making shipwreck of his spiritual life.

It seems a simple remedy, but the question arises at once: how is prayer to be made? Perhaps this may appear to be a 'modern' question; it is sometimes assumed that the old monks knew as it were by instinct how to pray. But apparently St Nilus's novices and correspondents had as many difficulties with it as religious and laymen of our own day and were as prone to the most ridiculous distractions. Here is a delightful passage on this trial which may perhaps comfort some of our contemporaries by showing them that human nature was much the same 1,500 years ago.

'We are often distracted from the words of prayer and follow thoughts that lead us astray without offering resistance. Having gone down on our knees, we present indeed a picture of prayer to the eye, but our minds wander to things that amuse us: so we talk pleasantly with our friends, give our enemies an angry dressing-down, enjoy dinner parties, build houses for our relatives, plant, travel, trade, are raised to the priesthood and administer the churches entrusted to us with great devotion—and so we turn over many things in our thoughts, dwelling on each as our inclinations dispose us.' (*De Voluntaria Paupertate*, 22; 997C,D.) But St Nilus draws this amusing picture only to provide a remedy, and his counsels are nothing if not practical. If we expect from him some esoteric 'wisdom of the East' we shall be grievously disappointed. His advice is as matter-of-fact as that of any 'hard-boiled' modern novice-master: Do not be too long over your prayers, he says, but alternate with work. Novices who will not work under pretext of giving their mind to better things find very little sympathy with him. 'Now here is a mistake novices should not make; it is this. Inexperienced as they are in the ways of prayer and monastic observance they ask to be given tasks that appear great to their imagination and want to leave the lesser ones aside. They seem to prefer eating what has been prepared by others and sparing their hands to a life that is good both for soul and body; whereas someone who divides his time between work and prayer and keeps a proper balance subjects his body through its labours and pacifies its unruly desires. Thus the soul co-operates with the body and

when she wants repose stirs up its desire for prayer as being the easier thing and conducive to refreshment. The work, too, profits by the change; for the soul will soon get back to it from prayer; since she gets depressed if she remains too long occupied with the same thing.' (*De Volunt. Paupert.*, 24; 999A,B.) 'Truly, laziness is the cause of many evils and uses leisure to make habitual vices worse and teach new ones. For it is a past master in the art of inventing new evils. Those therefore who under the pretext of perpetual prayer reject manual work do not only not pray—for the mind cannot always remain fixed on the object of its desires without relaxing—but are distracted beyond what is normal by many unseemly things.' (*Ibid.*, 26; 1001C.) Nevertheless we can follow the command to pray always for 'even in the midst of occupations the prudent and pious mind can always retain the thought of its Creator.' (*Letters*, 238; 169D.)

(To be concluded.)



CORRESPONDENCE

To the Editor, LIFE OF THE SPIRIT.

SIR,—The account given in your September issue of the Carmelite Lay Institute at Venasque provides a further interesting contribution to the recurring discussion on Contemplation whilst living in the world.

One cannot fail to admire the courage and devotion of these tertiaries; but two queries arise:

First; it seems to be assumed that a good soul might voluntarily choose to become a contemplative, and that this end could be attained within a training period of two years.

It would appear that the word 'contemplative', like the phrase 'inferiority complex', is acquiring a different meaning in general use from that assigned to it by the technical experts.

Do not all the mystical writers insist that contemplation is the work of God in a soul mysteriously initiated by Him, and often unperceived in the early stages, even by the spiritual director? The very nature of the preliminary purgation renders the course of illumination unintelligible to the developing contemplative soul herself.

We are told that the duration of the successive 'nights' varies a great deal, being very rarely brief, and often extending over a number of years.

Thus it would seem extraordinary that such an experience could be in any sense 'regimented', even by traditional mystics like the Carmelites.

Secondly; though contemplation might indeed result from a two-