

the task of the sons of the Church is now again to gather together the sciences, the discoveries, the new worlds won, in their due order and harmony; to penetrate them afresh with the faith; and, in dedicating them to God, to raise them to their predestined nobility.



ST NILUS, A SPIRITUAL DIRECTOR OF THE FIFTH CENTURY (II)

BY

H. C. GRAEF¹

SAIN'T NILUS'S characteristically balanced view of the life of prayer and action leads him, like St Thomas at a later date, to prefer the 'mixed' or apostolic life. 'A bishop,' he says, 'is a man accomplished both in action and contemplation (*praxei kai gnosei*), more perfect than the ascetics in the desert' (*Oratio ad Albanum*, 704A). It is a high ideal, difficult to attain, and calling for expert guidance. In his *Liber de monastica exercitatione* St Nilus traces the portrait of the perfect spiritual director which is as valid today as it was then. 'Those', he writes, 'who would undertake the guidance of others must first have fought their own passions and prudently stored up in their memory the experiences of this warfare so that they may hand them on to others and thus make victory easier for them.' (*Mon. Exerc.*, 25; 752A). This 'fight against the passions' is a typical conception occurring in many of the Greek Fathers who are influenced by Stoic philosophy. But most of them, and certainly St Nilus, succeeded in acclimatising it to Christian spirituality regarding it as a stage in the spiritual life roughly corresponding to the 'Purgative Way'. The *apatheia* to which it is meant to lead is not the indifference of the Stoic but rather the 'holy indifference' of a St Francis de Sales which enables the soul to listen to the divine voice undisturbed by the suggestions of her sinful propensities. Only if superiors and directors have purged their own faults and attained to a measure of serenity will they be able to 'bear the faults of all with great forbearance, and teach them patiently the things they do not know'. (*Ibid.*, 27; 756C).

'For the man whose duty it is to enlighten others must be solid through and through, without levity or emptiness, bearing the burdens and even the impurities of his subjects as far as may be

¹ The first part of this account of St Nilus appeared in *LIFE OF THE SPIRIT*, November, 1949, p. 224.

done without danger. For if he intends thoroughly to purify the character of those who come to him he cannot but be himself somewhat affected by their uncleanness. For when he discourses on the passions and removes moral stains from others, he cannot himself pass through wholly untouched for the very mention of these things pollutes the mind of the speaker, at least on the surface. Therefore the superior must be so experienced that he knows all the wiles of the enemy, whose secret artifices he can disclose to those entrusted to him and, showing up his tricks, can lead them to easy victory and bring them out of battle in triumph . . . but such men are few and far between.' (*Ibid.*, 28; 756D, 757A).

There is no room for emotionalism and sentiment in the doctrine of these early Greek Fathers; all is vigour and strenuous effort. It must be remembered that the world in which they lived was infested with the remains of the syncretism of the pagan Empire. Human passions were still untamed and often perverted, the generally accepted moral standards of society were not yet those of the Church as they were to be in the Middle Ages. This must be borne in mind if Nilus's writings seem to show an undue emphasis on the human element in the life of perfection to the detriment of the divine gift of grace. The Greek character was only too much inclined to let things slip, to spend itself in intellectual subtleties and to neglect the training of the will. If one reads the penitentiaries of a slightly later age one realises the appallingly low standard of Byzantine morals which called for a ruthless ascetic training. Yet it is not only the grosser vices that St Nilus castigates. Who would deny that his description of faults against fraternal charity has lost nothing of its actuality in our own day? Here it is. 'Who loves his neighbour so much that he regards him in all things as he regards himself? Who rejoices in the good progress of his brother as in his own and is not unreasonably angry at it, imagining out of envy that he himself has no reputation in those things in which he is surpassed by his neighbour? Who does not consider the honour of another in whatever it may be, to be the loss of his own honour? Who, if another is preferred to him in anything that brings recognition, is not dejected in spirit, thinking that to hold the second place is something dishonourable? Who is not bitten by the praises bestowed on the work of his colleague as if he himself had been criticised? Who is sorry about the misfortune of another as if it were his own? Who sympathises with the error of the other as with his own error?' (*De Paupertate*, 58; 1045 C,D).

Indeed the 'spiritual combat' seems to have remained the same as fallen human nature has remained the same. And if the Greek Fathers sometimes seem almost Pelagian in their emphasis on the

human side of this combat, this is not due to a natural activism—no one knew better than they the passivity of mystic prayer—but to the desire to lay solid foundations on which to raise the edifice of the spiritual life. St Nilus is very emphatic in declaring that the Holy Ghost and its real architect. 'The holy and life-giving Spirit', he writes, 'works many virtues. For those who train themselves for the spiritual life he makes strong in continence; others who fight, he invigorates unto confessing the Lord Jesus Christ. He uses another's tongue for uttering wisdom; he enlightens another's soul unto prophecy. Therefore, having him dwelling in you by great faith and good works, possessing such a great leader, guardian and fighter, fear no one, neither devil nor evil man who desires to harm your house that is fortified by God.' (*Letters*, 2, 204; 308 A-C). 'Not because of the works of righteousness', says the Saint, 'but from the mercy and great goodness of God have you received all you possess' (*Letters*, 1, 225; 165 B). It is our Lord, not ourselves, who conquers the evil in us: 'The hands of Christ affixed to the Cross and his transfixed feet signify an obstacle to evil deeds and to the course of impiety and sin. . . . For by the virtue of the Cross of the Lord we have vanquished, trodden under foot and defeated sin, which had first vanquished, deceived and defeated us.' (*Letters*, 1, 328; 201 A,B).

This insistence on the contemplation of Christ crucified and on the need for constant prayer counterbalances all possibly 'Pelagian' expressions, for it is 'prayer that washes away all impurity that has come upon us'. (*Letters*, 1, 24; 92A). He is not only the sensible director who warns beginners against the danger of 'overdoing things' but also the experienced guide in the higher ways of contemplation. First however he warns souls not to aspire to the 'better things' before it is time. 'Only when you shall have been able to uproot all the obnoxious and insensate passions, only then should you devote yourself to the contemplation of sublime things. But if, before having defeated the bellicose demons, you dare to ascend the mount by force against what appears to be the divine Will, you will not find the help and assistance of the Lord, and the enemies will wound you like bees.' (*Letters*, 2, 89; 241 A,B). In times like our own, when there is particular interest in the mystical life it is very necessary to insist on this sound rule. It is such an easy temptation to attempt to bypass the laborious way of purgation, of vocal and discursive prayer, and to arrive at the peace of contemplation without the effort of conquering one's faults. But this peace would be illusory and resemble Quietism, providing a house swept and garnished ready to receive any devils that might choose to take up their abode in it. Only after first following the well-trodden path

of penance will the soul be ready for the better things. For the Lord desires to be sought before he lets himself be found. 'Christ', writes St Nilus, 'rejoices when we do violence to him in order that he might remain with us. For when the light of virtue has forsaken us, let us do violence to him that he should abide with us, and reclining with our worthlessness and littleness should break for us the divine bread and give it to our soul. For nothing is more powerful than prayer. . . . Prayer is omnipotent and unconquerable, and the devil is anxious to hinder us in it by the hardest temptations so that we should not profit by it, but leave behind the weapon that is most advantageous and salutary, namely prayer in Christ.' (*Letters*, 3, 36; 404 C,D).

Our time, so inclined to trust natural activities even where spiritual things are concerned, needs this teaching on the efficacy of prayer. But the soul must also realise that prayer is not an easy thing. She must 'do violence' to God; that means she must be insistent, must try again and again to approach God, even if all seems cold and dark. It is here that so many souls make shipwreck. 'God does not answer', they will say, 'so what is the use? Let us rather immerse ourselves in works, then we shall at least see some results.' But this is precisely what the devil desires. Leaving behind 'the weapon that is most advantageous and salutary', we shall be found unarmed and open to all his suggestions. This does not mean that the soul that gives herself generously to prayer will be free from temptation. On the contrary, the further she advances in the ways of the spiritual life the more sorely will she be tried. Nearly all the mystics who describe the various states of the spiritual life speak about the vicissitudes that await the man who enters upon the 'passive' ways. St Nilus gives a vivid description: 'It so happens that when a man is about to fall into spiritual trial and affliction the grace of the Holy Spirit anticipates it and consoles the soul abundantly, and comforts her in gladness of heart, and quietens her with a flow of sweet tears. Then he delivers her to the enemy to be tempted and afflicted and troubled, and then she finds herself in bitterness, fear and wrath, evil desires and improper movements and perplexity of heart, briefly, in innumerable evils. When then all this happens, and the enemy prevails, and a man becomes downcast and despairs of himself, the grace of God flies to him again, putting the demon to flight, generously cherishing the exhausted man and renewing and refreshing him, as a mother lovingly embraces her crying baby and gives him her breast.' (*Letters*, 3, 40; 405 C,D).

These trials, which seem so cruel while they last, are only permitted or even sent by God to make man stronger, more ready for

union with him. The contemplative life is not possible without them. 'What did you expect', he writes to a monk, 'when you chose a quiet and secluded life? Was it not afflictions and temptations, innumerable assaults, ambushes and tricks of the wicked demons? Why are you now becoming disgruntled, dispirited and depressed because your soul is pierced in many ways by the arrows of temptation? But endure it generously, giving thanks with a firm mind, with frequent supplication, sustained vigil and temperance, remaining close to the Lord, and you will see the end.' (*Letters*, 2, 137; 257 A,B). St Nilus knew well that the outwardly quiet life of the contemplative is normally full of interior struggles. After the 'active purifications' when the soul had to fight her passions herself, there come the passive ones which can be countered only by patience. St Nilus sings a veritable hymn to patience, reminding us of St Catherine of Siena's celebrated treatise. 'Godly patience', he says, 'is a great help in time of temptations. For the Lord says, "In your patience you shall possess your souls".' He did not say: in your fasting, or in your quiet, or in your psalmody, though all these things work harmoniously towards the salvation of a soul, but 'in your patience'. In patience; that is in whatever temptation that may come, and whatever affliction, whether it be injury or scorn or dishonour from anyone, great or small, whether weakness of body or satanic upheavals. . . . 'In your patience you shall possess your souls. That does not just mean "patiently", but with great thanksgiving and prayer and humility, that you may bless and sing hymns to the Saviour, the God of all, to him who does good and brings all things to a good end. . . . For what is firmer and more valiant than patience? The patience, I mean, that is according to God, the queen of virtues, the foundation of brave deeds, the peaceful port. She, she is peace in war, calm in the waves, security in ambush and danger, and standing upright in herself is harder than adamant which neither heavy armour nor arrows can move nor enemies perturb.' (*Letters*, 3, 35; 404 B). This glorious virtue will assist us to overcome our faults as well as the wiles of the devil; and when we have overcome, our reward will be great, for the soul shall at last find union with her Lord.

This union is conceived in terms of the working out of the divine image in the soul for Christ proposes none less than the Father himself for our imitation. 'Be you therefore perfect, as also your Heavenly Father is perfect.' (Matt. 5, 48). 'Imitation', says St Nilus, 'must indeed be possible for he who commands it knows the power of each one of us.' (*De Paupertate*, 44; 1024 C). This is how he describes the man that has attained to the image: 'Who shall deny that he who . . . flees from the society of vain and indifferent

people, and who at home peacefully devotes himself to prayer and occupation with the words of God, who goes out rarely, but is gentle, unperturbed, sympathetic, charitable—who shall deny, I say, that such a man is truly a lover of God, his image and likeness, and radiates the divine rays of goodness?' (*ibid.*, 45; 1125 C,D). This picture of the perfect man is characteristic of St Nilus. It is the ideal of the contemplative whom external happenings no longer affect, who meets every situation with gentleness but whose love of peace is in no way selfish; for the power of his contemplation shows itself in his relations to his neighbours, in his sympathy with their sufferings and his readiness to relieve them.

The retirement of the contemplative who 'flees from the society of vain and indifferent people' is often misunderstood and probably was also misunderstood in St Nilus's day. Love of solitude is not misanthropy, avoidance of superficial relationships is not lack of charity—quite the contrary. To spend a large part of one's time in conversation with empty-headed people who cannot bear solitude harms the contemplative and does not profit the other. There is an influence that needs neither words nor physical proximity, only prayer and fasting. It is one of the sad characteristics of our time that this influence is so little understood, that the silent apostolate of the men and women who peacefully devote themselves to prayer is so little appreciated. For the true apostle though full of zeal for the kingdom of God will leave even his success in winning souls to divine Providence; for 'this is the way of life that befits the rational creature, to devote himself to the service of God and to receive the things that come from the treasury of his Providence'. (*De Paupertate*, 18; 992 D).

But will this calm, almost 'inactive' way, be really efficacious for souls? St Nilus is convinced of it. 'Let us flee', he says, 'from the way of life they practise in cities and villages in order that those in the cities and villages may run to us; let us pursue solitude, that we may attract those who now flee from us.' (*De Monast. Exerc.*, 20; 745 D). The history of the saints bears out the truth of this apparent paradox both in the literal and even more in the metaphorical sense. It is literally true that a saint in the desert will cause people to flock to him. Not only was that the case with so many of the Desert Fathers who were besieged by people seeking their help and advice to such an extent that they had to retire from one desert place to another without being able to escape the crowds, but we have examples in our own time. We need only think of the wretched little French village of Ars, known to no one until the Lord sent one of his saints there who loved solitude and could never find it because of the multitudes who began to invade Ars

attracted by nothing except his sanctity. But if taken metaphorically St Nilus's words are even more obviously true. The more thoroughly a man separates himself from the standards of the world the more influence he will have on souls. It is a widespread fallacy in the present age that for a man to gain a hold on his contemporaries he has to accept their standards. Our Lord never acted in this way. There is a German proverb saying: if you give the devil your little finger he will take your whole hand. If a man begins to live according to the standards of the world, to talk its jargon, to share its pleasures, even if it be done with the best intentions, the world will soon have perverted him before he has converted it. It is true that St Paul says that he made himself 'all things to all men'. But this means only that in his preaching he sought the kind of approach that might most easily lead them to Christ and that in his manner of life he respected their prejudices so as not to cause scandal to any one—but not that he shared their amusements or their lower standards. Without the flight from the standards of the market-place which St Nilus preaches no true spiritual life is possible, and without a vigorous spiritual life no really efficacious apostolate. For St Nilus in no way belittles the apostolate. On the contrary he writes to a fellow monk: 'If I do not transmit the grace that is given me to others, I shall have to give an account of it on the Day of Judgment because I have buried my spiritual talent in silence. So also will an account be demanded from you, if you do not distribute to those who have a right to it the heavenly gift of knowledge that is entrusted to you.' (*Letters*, 2, 30; 212 C).

The way that St Nilus proposed to his disciples and correspondents is a sure way. It is the classical way that leads from detachment and poverty to union with God and thence to the 'contemplata aliis tradere' preached by St Thomas. It is the work of a lifetime and yet the generous soul may achieve it quite quickly 'for the intention, directed towards the term of the effort, has a short cut, quickly reaching what is intended spurred on by eagerness and executing a work that needs much time in a disproportionately short period'. (*De Paupertate*, 44; 1024 D). The ideal of perfection is proposed to all men and however late in life a man may respond to the call he has as much hope of reaching the goal as he who began as a youth. This goal is the peace of the perfect. When 'the habits are put in order, the passions subjected, the senses do nothing that is wrong; the ways of progress towards serenity are straightened out, asceticism has become a habit, the heart has peace in its depth, struggle has ceased . . . the flesh no longer wars against the spirit because it is altogether defeated'. (*Ibid.*, 55; 1041 A,B). But this peace is no human achievement, it is the gift of God for

which 'we must ceaselessly give thanks to the Lord Christ who has brought us to such stability'. (*Ibid.*, 56; 1044 A). And because human perfection is not the achievement of man but the work of God St Nilus never discourages anyone. He does not mince his words where he suspects ill-will but where he sees men bowed down under the weight of their sins he spares no effort to give them new hope. While one ponders these writings of fifteen hundred years ago time seems to lose its significance before the eternal wisdom that teaches God's lovers to comfort and enlighten their fellows in their follies and needs which have remained and will remain the same as long as the fallen race of Adam inhabits the earth.



CORRESPONDENCE

To the Editor, LIFE OF THE SPIRIT.

Sir,—May I be allowed to make a few remarks on the letter of Gladys M. Stanford in your November issue?

(1) 'It seems to be assumed that a good soul might voluntarily choose to become a contemplative.' Objections: (a) This criticism would also apply to all postulants entering a Contemplative Order. (b) Why should a vocation to a contemplative Secular Institute not be as much a call from God as that to a Contemplative Order?

(2) 'And that this end could be attained within a training period of two years.' No one assumes that—as little as that a member of a Contemplative Order becomes necessarily a 'contemplative' within the period of his or her postulancy and noviciate.

(3) 'Do not all the mystical writers insist that contemplation is the work of God in a soul mysteriously initiated by him . . .?' This again applies equally to all members of Contemplative Orders, and not to Secular Institutes in particular.

(4) 'The very nature of the preliminary purgation renders the course of illumination unintelligible to the developing contemplative soul herself.' Again, why should this apply to Secular Institutes in particular? Your correspondent continually confuses the external organisation, the 'contemplative state', by analogy with the 'state of perfection', with the actual life of contemplation, which indeed is the work of God—in contemplative monasteries as much as in Secular Institutes.

(5) 'Thus it would seem extraordinary that such an experience could be in any way "regimented", even by traditional mystics (?) like the Carmelites.' I fail to see why this experience should be 'regimented' in Secular Institutes any more than in Contemplative Orders—no one would dream of doing so, least of all Carmelites who are traditionally averse to regimentation of the spiritual life.—

Yours, etc.,

H. C. GRAEF.