


## ST NILUS

[According to the traditional legend, based on the *Narrationes de cuede Monachorum* (J. P. Migne, *Patrologia Graeca* lxxix, col. 583-694) St Nilus was the descendant of a noble family of Constantinople and eparch of that city under Theodosius the Great (379-395 A.D.). In his later years he left his wife and daughter and, together with his son, became a monk on Mount Sinai. When the community was attacked by hordes of barbarians he escaped, and, after many adventures, was reunited to his son, who had been taken prisoner.

But since the *Narrationes* have been proved spurious this story is no longer accepted. Moreover, the large collection of his Letters (Ibid. col. 81-581) show him as an experienced Superior and Novice Master of a monastery at Ancyra in Galatia, which he seems to have entered c. 390. He was probably a personal disciple of St John Chrysostom, whose sufferings he followed with deep sympathy. He died c. 430.—H. C. GRAEF.]

## ON SUPERIORS AND DIRECTORS

(St Nilus, *Liber de Monastica Exercitatione*, chs. 24 to 35.)

HOSE who would undertake the guidance of others must first have fought their own passions, and prudently stored up in their memory their experiences in this warfare, so that they may hand them on to others and thus make victory easier for them. Now there are some who have indeed mastered their passions, possibly by hard discipline, yet ignore the deceptive character of their victory. For, as may happen to soldiers in a night battle, they have failed actually to engage the enemy and to give sufficient attention to his wiles. But this they cannot see themselves, nor do they hear it from others; and so, having only their own ends in view, they impose servitude on their brethren as if they were slaves, placing all their glory in the number of those whom they rule. For they find it easy, indeed, to command with words, however difficult of execution their orders may be, but cannot bring themselves to teach by example; and so it becomes evident to all that their object in taking on the government was not to be useful to those who come to them, but to procure their own advantage. Now what happens to these cruel and inhuman guides is this: when they have got the power to punish the lights of their contemplation go out immediately, and so their actions, deprived of the guidance of thought, come to nothing.

For let them not make the mistake of thinking that the work of spiritual guidance will give them an opportunity for relaxation

and enjoyment; on the contrary, the government of souls is the hardest of all. For to those who rule human beings the diversity of manners and the mischievous possibilities of the reasoning faculty make the office of a superior arduous, and those who undertake it should be anointed like athletes for the fight, so that they may bear the faults of all with great forbearance, and teach them patiently the things they ignore.

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 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, so that he can disclose his secret artifices 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.

Now I do not say these things to prevent men from guiding the young to perfection; only I want to impress upon them that they must first themselves acquire the habit of virtue in proportion to the greatness of the task. They ought not to undertake such a work all unprepared, seeing only the pleasant side of it, the devotion of disciples and the praise of outsiders, and disregarding its dangers. For to devote oneself to the guidance of others is praiseworthy only after all one's own passions have been subdued, when wars no longer threaten from anywhere, and when there is no more need of defensive weapons.

If, then, someone who has received one or two disciples is, against his will, obliged to take on more, let him first examine himself carefully if he really is a teacher by deed rather than by word, and can propose to his disciples his own life as a model of virtue. For he must realise that it is his duty to do battle no less for his subjects than for himself. For as he will have to give an account of himself, so also of them, once he has accepted responsibility for their salvation.

## WORK, PRAYER AND DISTRACTIONS

(St Nilus, *De Voluntaria Paupertate ad Magnam*, chs. 22 to 27.)

The memory of carnal desires not only hinders colloquy with God, but also defiles the mind that seems to pray with foul imaginations. Of course it is a good thing to persevere in prayer and to train the soul to converse with God—but it must be done in such a way that what is meant to be a time of peace does not turn into an occasion for war. Nor should prayer time be prolonged beyond measure, else the only result will be that the warring passions are given free play to ensnare the thoughts in vain daydreams, draw them away from the secret port of prayer and, tyrannically, drag them down to the wisdom of the flesh.

For 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.

But this is not the right way to pray; for prayer needs a mind free from all such preoccupations. 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 put to tasks that appear great to their imagination and want to leave the lesser ones aside. They appear to prefer eating what has been prepared by others and sparing their hands for 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 procuring 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.

But the idler feeds the passions by his laziness, and gives rein to his lusts to move where their nature draws them. Especially at the time of prayer is the mind wholly turned to what disturbs it, feeding on what the passions suggest instead of speaking to God and asking for the things that are fitting. Truly, laziness is the cause

of many evils, and uses leisure to make habitual vices worse and teach new ones. For it is past master in the art of inventing new evils. Those, therefore who under 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. Nourishing the proud body they make it unfit for prayer by the very leisure which they thought would provide freedom from care for the soul, and thus they become involved in a labyrinth of inescapable thoughts. For how shall a man be zealous and constant in prayer if the mind that guides this prayer is distracted by passions and perpetually falls away—I do not say from perfect ecstasy, but even from attending to the words of prayer? For the highest prayer of the perfect is a certain rapture of the mind, a real ecstasy from the things of sense perception, when with unspeakable groanings the spirit draws near to God who reads the dispositions of the heart like an open book.

*Translated by H. C. Graef.*

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## REVIEWS

**THE BOOK OF PSALMS** in Latin and English with the Canticles used in the Divine Office. (Burns Oates; 12s. 6d.)

We must be grateful that publishers in this country have given us, in so handy a form, both the recent version of the Latin Psalter and the new English translation by Monsignor Ronald Knox. Of the former, no appreciation is needed here. It can best be studied as published, first in 1945, by the Pontifical Biblical Institute (not Commission, as on the fly-leaf of the present work), with its own excellent Introduction and notes. But of the English Version a great deal could well be said.

If he were giving us a wholly new translation of the Psalms and Canticles alone, Mgr Knox would have undertaken a great labour. In sheer bulk they are no small matter. And the original text is often so obscure that, even though the Biblical Institute led the way, it must often have been hard to decide on a determined sense. The very familiarity of the Psalms in more languages than one, would make difficult any freshness of approach. The fact that they present a continual variation on a few themes would make it hard to avoid monotony in the rendering. Mgr Knox has shown great courage. He has brought this particular task to an end. He has found an acceptable sense—following, though not invariably, the new Latin Version—even for hardly intelligible passages. For good measure, he has added at the foot of the page a by no means baldly literal translation