

Miles (Nilus) Stryker

NILUS OF SORA: A VOICE IN THE WILDERNESS

It was in the vast wilderness of Northern Russia, deep within the marshes and forests which spread out from the Volga, that St. Nilus of Sora called Russian monasticism back to simplicity, humility, prayer and the heart teachings of the early church fathers.

Little is known of the specific details of St. Nilus' life. The main outlines were recorded in the Patericon of St. Sergius' Holy Trinity Monastery, and there are also fragments of letters, commentaries and writings that have survived both Tartar destruction and church negligence.

For years, the Russian church saw Nilus more as an enigma than a blessing. The early Russian church authorities who had not been able to value his perspective, nor heed his warnings, made sure that both he and his followers, and their ideas, were relegated to the back pages of ecclesiastical history.

It speaks well of Orthodoxy, and the Russian Church in particular, that it was finally able to embrace him as a saint along with those who held quite different views. It was not until the many years after his death that there was revived interest in his writings and ideas and his wonderful personal example of Christian devotion and fortitude.

Though never officially canonized by the Russian Church, Saint Nilus began to appear on local church calendars at least as early as the late 18th century (as noted in 1864) and is reported to be officially presented on the official ecclesiastical calendar as late as 1903.

Departure for a virtuous life

Nilus of Sora (Nil Sorsky) was born around the year 1443 with the family named Maikov. Some writers present the view he came from the nobility but this seems mainly substantiated by the fact that he had close disciples and admirers who were of nobility and because of his clear and erudite writing style and education.

Nilus refers to himself with the epithet *poselyanin* (rural inhabitant), and many narratives accept his peasant origins.

He entered the monastic life early and was tonsured "in my youth," according to his own words. Not much is known of these early monastic years. He entered the famous monastery of St. Cyril of Belozersk. It seems to be a bit unclear exactly how long he was there nor the particulars of why he left. Some narratives present the idea that because of his scholastic abilities, and diligent efforts, he was accepted into the Russian monastery on the Holy Mountain of Athos in Greece.

There is a fragment of a letter, however, which indicates another reason and a more personal sense of frustration and dissatisfaction within the spiritual community at White Lake.

"Was not my departure from the monastery (White Lake) for the sake of spiritual profit? Yes, for its sake; for I did not see there the preservation of the way of life according to God's law and the traditions of the Fathers, but rather a life according to one's own will and human ideas; and many there were who, acting in such a corrupt way, imagined that they were living a virtuous life."

It seems that Nilus left to begin a search for a "purer" form of monastic living and along with his disciple, Innocent (who became St. Innocent of Komet), he traveled East to the revered monastic community at Mt. Athos. When he arrived, and how long he stayed at the Russian Monastery on the Greek isle is not known.

It is thought that he mastered Greek, though many of the early writings of the church fathers had already been translated (though not compiled) into Russian. It was at this time he entered into years of dedicated reading, translation, and study of the early church fathers. He seemed to have been particularly fond of the writings of Basil the Great, Macarius of Egypt, St. Issac of Syria, Philotheus of Sinai, John Cassian, Nilus of Sinai (his namesake), Maximus the Confessor, Simeon Stethatus, Peter Damascene, St. John of the Ladder, and Gregory of Sinai. His excitement at these studies and the depths of these fathers' writings is reflected in the following quote:

"I lived like a bee flitting from one fine flower to another in order to know the garden of life, Christian truth, and in order to revive my flagging soul and to prepare for its salvation."

A cell outside the cloister

It was during his stay at Mt. Athos that Nilus began to refine his life long practice of "mental prayer." The Jesus Prayer was used as the center of contemplative devotion and Mystery at Mt. Athos and he is presumed to have worked under the guidance of an accomplished Elder (Starets) at this time.

It is reported that Nilus ventured from the Mediterranean monastery to make a pilgrimage to the holy city of Constantinople and visited monasteries in the surrounding area though no details of those sojourns remain. He apparently traveled with his disciple Innocent and continued in his studies and travels until he either returned to Mt. Athos or returned to Russia. Again, the details are sketchy and a reliable chronology is not known.

It is recorded, however, that Nilus did return to Russia and to St. Cyril of Belokersk (White Lake) after his travels and stay at Mt. Athos. He had been imbued with the learning and spirit of Greek monasticism and sought to bring back to Russia what he had learned. After Nilus's return from Greece he dwelt for some time at the St. Cyril monastery, "Having build a cell outside the cloister." Apparently however, his devotions and contemplations were constantly interrupted by people seeking his advice and company and he decided to move his hut further away to a less populated area.

"Now I moved farther from the monastery where, by the grace of God, I found a place suited to my tastes, where few worldlings frequented."

Because his initial experiences in a large monastery had seemed to have many drawbacks, Nilus hoped to bring to his homeland a new form of monastic life that was built on much smaller "communities" of monks. What became known as the skete monastic system had developed outside of Russia. Nilus had observed Athonite and Byzantine sketes during his travels and residency in the East and thought that this form solved many of the problems he felt existed in the large communities he had previously experienced.

Sketes are founded on the idea of a few monks who seek to engage in a contemplative life building individual cells for prayer and contemplation near enough to attend liturgy and services together and help each other in maintaining a livelihood or at least a way to sustain themselves. In this way, both a sense of private devotion and contemplation could be incorporated with the more communal interaction of ritual and assistance

In the world but not of it

The skete system which Nilus brought to Russia was a middle path between established coenobitic (communal) and eremitic (solitary, "hermit-like") forms of monastic devotion, prayer and life. The founding of smaller "communities" of devoted monks allows each practitioner the utmost time for concentration upon private prayer and solitary meditation and also acknowledges the importance of communal liturgies, sacraments, and ritual.

The skete communities are based on the notion of individual labor and the idea that each monk works to provide for their own sustenance. It also realizes that life often times presents the need for material and spiritual assistance in cooperation with others. This new middle path of asceticism became the base for a new form of monasticism which would spread throughout

Russia and the Trans-Volga area. For Nilus it was a means of creating a way to live in a profound and voluntary solitude in relation to God within the nexus of the human community. It was his way to fulfill the dictum of living "in the world but not of it," of sharing this new paradigm with those who sought to move toward God, and bring to his homeland a way for monastics to honor their vows more fully. He saw this as a way to avoid the corruptions of materialism and to constantly bring the monastic practitioner back to an awareness of the presence of God in every moment of their life.

The location that Nilus chose that was to become the base of his small skete was describe by travelers as a swampy area near the River Sora.

There were large expanses of pine trees, but the river was not swift flowing in that particular area and it was described as a stagnant and isolated wilderness. The ground was level though wet, and Nilus had to build up the earth where he built his initial cell (hut). It was in this solitary and desolate spot that the beginnings of the skete system in Russia was founded. From here, its influence spread and became firmly implanted as a "third way" of Russian monasticism and contemplative community settlement.

A friend on the same journey

At first, Nilus turned away those who sought to become his disciples. When he moved his hut further from St. Cyrils, he felt that the isolation would discourage interruption and the monks which sought his advise. But a small group of dedicated and insistent followers soon began to gather around him for his spiritual advice and teachings.

"Many virtuous brethren came to me wishing to live with us, though I refused many, because I am a sinful and stupid person and so weak in soul and body. But some of those turned away by me insisted on staying and would not cease knocking on my abode and they gave me no rest. I then looked upon it, perhaps, this is the will of God that they come to us, perhaps they have a right to share in the tradition of the saints and keep the commands of God and live according to the tradition on the Holy Fathers."
Nilus never thought of himself as an Elder or starets in the traditional sense. He presented himself to those who

sought his instruction as a friend who was on the same journey, who knew a few of the paths and trails they must walk, and had some knowledge of the trials they would necessarily encounter on this great sojourn toward God.

He saw himself as an equal to those who sought his council and never claimed the title of Elder, nor the spiritually elevated status that it implied. He taught by indication and example and shared what he had learned in his long years of studying the writings of the Gospels, the Epistles and the writings of the church fathers. It was not an easy journey. He demanded devotion to God and the Rules of the Skete. The men who stayed with him to study and pray faced not only the spiritual tests of the journey but the hardship of the poverty they voluntarily assumed as the boundaries of their faith and life.

"If any of them were not willing to live according to the commands of God and the tradition of the Holy Fathers, they then were to cease knocking at my humble abode. I sent away such as proved lazy and quarrelsome."

Dignity, freedom and liberty

The activities of the monks within the skete and of Nilus himself were primarily centered around prayer and devotional work. Each monk, however, set his own individual prayer rules and activities, was responsible for maintaining his own means of attaining sustenance, and abided by the common rules of skete life.

"Nilus' teachings focused upon dignity, freedom and liberty. His "sketes" were organized to ensure a maximum of freedom wherein his monks were at liberty to seek after God in their own unique manner. True sanctity, Nilus taught, was not defined by a fixed amount of ascetic deeds, or prayer, but by movement towards the goal, that is, movement toward God. This movement is felt to be the purpose of human life, and therefore the meaning of human dignity."

Nilus and his disciples took to copying books and correcting the major errors that he felt existed both in the translated texts and the editorial interpretations within the manuscripts, especially the lives of the Saints. Nilus was thought to have written a major compendium of the "Lives of the Saints," but it unfortunately has been lost to history, though references are occasionally made to it in later studies of his life and work.

By the end of the 15th century, the Orthodox Church and monastic institutions had grown and consolidated along with the greater Russian peoples to become powerful landowners and seats of both secular and ecclesiastical power. It was estimated that as much as one third of the arable land was owned or controlled by these large monasteries and church clerics.

The political power of the feudal state both supported and was buttressed by the church hierarchs. But as with all major conglomerates of power, there was widespread abuses of authority in dealing both with the peasants that worked the land and the finances which were accrued by the church landholders themselves.

"The monasteries were among the first of the landlords to petition the crown for charters fixing peasants to the soil....At its height, the St. Sergius Monastery of the Trinity had 100,000 peasant 'souls' cultivating its estates scattered in 15 provinces."

Contradictions of rituals

Not only was the church and its monastic institutions major economic and political players within a growing national identity, they were the major sources of higher learning and also served as the center for the cultural expansion and development during this time. Craftsmen, architects, masons and builders, wood carvers, goldsmiths, silver smiths, jewelers, painters and artists, iconographers, and writers all began to develop and flourish under church sponsorship and service.

Some of the most beautiful and lasting music of Western civilization also grew from this new flourishing of Russian national culture as it sought its own blending of Christianity and native music. In trying to examine the times and influences in which St. Nilus lived, it was not exactly a one-way street. Much can be said about the birth pains of nationhood, when people are struggling to find a common denominator of language and culture and religion.

Mistakes are made and excesses take place. Sometimes values are lost or forgotten, and sometimes religious institutions get giddy with growth and power. We are all humans, and the human propensity for foibles seems to work itself out in even the most religious and seemingly moral institutions.

But it was these very contradictions that St. Nilus saw and warned us to be wary of. Orthodox Christianity, he said, teaches that in order to maintain the sacredness of its rituals and the essence of its teachings, one must be "in the world and not of it."

For St. Nilus, this is the primary responsibility of a Christian. To be as aware and kind as possible in our human relations, while all the time trying to maintain our devotion and a steadfast relationship to God, is what Christ

called each of us to do. He saw the hypocrisy and danger of a church hierarchy that he thought was losing its way.

The edifice of the church may have been growing, but St. Nilus saw that the interior was crumbling with greed and lust for power and control. He was not willing to sacrifice the very essence of the esoteric Mystery of the church for the grand architecture and structure of man and his nation-state.

Reformers or heretics?

Nilus and his disciples lived a relatively obscure and peaceful life until 1490, when he was asked to attend a council convened by the church to decide the fate of a group of heretics known as the Judaizers. The Judaizers were a small group of rather well placed intellectual ecclesiastics who were beginning to have an influence on the theological interpretations and development of the church.

They were centered around Novgorod and began to make in-roads in the 1470s when other criticisms of the established church were on the rise. Many of the specifics of the heresy have been lost or disputed by church historians, though there seems to have been a primary concern with the reestablishment of Old Testament interpretations based on the Books of Moses and the reestablishment of the rites of the Judaic tradition as the base of church sacraments.

The Judiazers were accused of being both traditional Jews and "radical reformers." Their ideas have been considered by historians as both free-thinking Judaism combined with Christian overtones, or Kabbalistic mysticism. They are said to have denied the Trinitarian view of God, the incarnation of The Son, the cult of saints and the spiritual value of icons. Their studies are said to have drawn on astrology, alchemical and hermetical manuscripts and writings, as well as ancient Kabbalist texts.

They did not circumcise their Orthodox converts, as a way of maintaining their secrecy within the church, though they certainly looked toward Judaism and the Old Testament as their major source of theology. It has been presented that the word for Jew and the word for Spaniard in Russian is very similar and that there is a possibility that the Judiazers could trace their roots to the Jewish alchemist from Spain who migrated through what is now Eastern Europe to Russia.

Political and spiritual heresy

The Judiazers were also very critical of the growing wealth and landholdings of the monasteries and the church and sought a return to a simpler type of spirituality and devotion. Their threat to the church was not really considered as important until they began to "convert" priests and gained the sympathy of members of the Tsars family to their critical perspectives.

The Judaizers' influence continued to spread within both the church and civil society for some 15 years until rumors of their secret and mystical sect reached the new bishop of Novgorod.

Archbishop Gennadij was appointed to the district of Novgorod in 1484. But it was not until 1487 that he got wind of the small heretical bands of secret followers within his jurisdiction and he began his push to crush the heretics.

Gennadij viewed the Roman Catholic office of Inquisition quite favorably and did not think that the central authorities in Moscow (both political and spiritual) were taking the heresy seriously enough and began to gather his own forces within the church to eliminate the Judiazers.

He wrote both the Primate of Moscow and the grand duke to report his findings. The grand duke ordered Gennadij to arrest the heretics and bring them to Moscow for a trial. Gennadij, however, had made enemies within the church on his rise to power, and Gerontius, the Primate of Moscow, was one of them. Gerontius did not follow through on the request to arrest the heretics and try them, and it was not until after his death some three years later that Gennadij was able to request a National Church Council to deal with the matter.

Joseph's Enlightener

In 1490, a church Synod was convened to discuss the Judaizer heresy. Gennadij found an ally in Joseph, the abbot of the Volokolamsk monastery. Joseph headed a large and strictly run monastery and was a capable writer and defender of his points of view.

He wrote his well-known treatise *The Enlightener* (Prosvetiel) as a defense against the Judaizer heresy. In it, he defended the traditional Orthodox theological perspectives. But writing treatises and admonishing the heretical ideas of others was not his main weapon against heresy.

He strongly defended the Inquisitional treatment of heretics by excommunicating and turning them over to civil authority to be burned alive. He justified the use of civil authority in these matters as a way to defend the Christian state and the rule of the authorities that were in power because of the grace of God. He tried to persuade the authorities that if the heretics were allowed to live then the very existence of their rule was threatened. Joseph was a studious, well-read scholar.

He was well versed in both the Bible and Patristic fathers and presented a convincing case against the heretics. The last four chapters of the Enlightener dealt specifically with the reasons why corporal punishment and execution should be followed by the church in regards the Judaizers.

He argued that they were not in fact a Christian heresy at all, but rather an apostate faction which had left Christianity behind. He demanded death for the leaders, life imprisonment (in genuine prisons) for most of the followers and long and strict probationary periods for the very few he felt would genuinely recant.

Both Paisius Yaroslavov (an honored Russian starets and thought by many to be Nilus' teacher in Russia) and Nilus were present at the Synod of 1490. They were known to oppose both the secular persecution and ecclesiastic trial of heretics. And both when dealing with infractions by both monks and the laity always counselled forgiveness and charity.

Against persecution of heretics

Nilus thought that the relationship between an individual and God was known only to God. He questioned the church's role in any attempt to bring so-called heretics back into the church fold with any other means other than admonition, prayer and example. Though there are no specific records of the exchange between those who were against the persecution of the Judaizers and the Josephites who supported their excommunication and death, Nilus always maintained his opposition to corporal punishment and execution.

Some writers say that he may have admitted "certain circumstances" where the state could intervene in heretical punishment but that "he advocated clemency as more becoming to Christians." In any case, he resolutely opposed capital punishment. Saint Nilus taught quite uncompromisingly that the human conscience must be free and that none should be persecuted for his religious views.

It must be remembered that the torture and execution of heretics by the church and state was the norm throughout Europe at this time. The Roman Church's Inquisition was in full swing in the West, and there was no sense of discussion and debate regarding religious views outside of the canonical dialogues within the church.

"Within the church" is the pivotal concept. If the divergence of belief was considered "outside" the church or the boundaries of what defined the traditional Christian belief system, then the beliefs were considered as heresy and the believers dealt with in rather severe and gruesome ways. For Nilus to have spoken against both the civil and ecclesiastical persecution of heretics was truly a revolutionary approach outside of the traditional standards of the day.

Nilus' views on the freedom of the individual to pursue a personal relationship to God and the idea that God alone could define that relationship was incredibly tolerant given his culture and society. There was no complicated philosophy nor theoretical propositions which were the base of his tolerance and ideas of freedom. He based his view on the notion of Christian forgiveness and charity.

Tolerance and charity

He always returned to Christ as an example for us all to follow, not only in our developing relationship to God, but for both the civil authorities and the hierarchy of the church.

He insisted that we remember that the civil ideas of a Christian society were based primarily on this constant calling to forgiveness and love. Therefore, those institutions and authorities (including the Tsar) which sought to emulate Christ must serve as an example in their ability to forgive and accept back into the fold those who had strayed from the traditions and understandings of the Church.

There are several historical perspectives on these events which are in contention. The chronology of the Church Synods at this time are a bit muddled. Some writers present the understanding that the Judaizers were basically "slapped on the wrist" at this time, and it was not until after 1504 or Nilus' death in 1508 that subsequent persecutions by Joseph, and the group of clerics which associated themselves with his view, prevailed and the leaders of the Judaizers were burned alive and the remainder imprisoned.

But whatever the particulars of the chronology, it is a fact that the heretics were eventually killed or imprisoned and the heresy of the Judaizers wiped out or forced even more underground. The heresy, however, never had any further significant influence on the theology or thought of the church.

And the tolerance and Christian charity which Nilus counseled, for however long it prevailed, finally succumbed to the standards of the day regarding the treatment of those "outside" of the traditions of the church.

There is also disagreement when the next, and perhaps the major, debate in the Church took place. Whether the Church Synod took place in 1503 or 1504 and whether it was convened to deal with the primary question of the Judaizers or the marriage of church clerics and the problems of their widows, two major views and camps developed around the issue of property. Once again, Nilus was the center of controversy.

Outside of earthly cares

For years Nilus, had lived in the wilderness at his Skete with about a dozen monks. He had little contact with the outside world. He was admired for his scholarly and humble devotion to God and his self-effacing service to his students and the church.

Together, they had built individual huts as cells and a small chapel for liturgy and worship. They maintained a severe and simple life as ascetics and contemplatives outside of the worldly concerns of the large monasteries and the accompanying concerns and problems of owning vast expanses of land. The monks at Nilus' skete engaged in solitary prayer and contemplation, gathered weekly for liturgy, and copied and translated the writings of the early church fathers.

Nilus is said to have written an authoritative "lives of saints" and commentary on the desert ascetics he so admired. Nilus had always insisted that the monks at his skete do their own labor and provide for their own sustenance.

They owned no large tracks of land nor employed any peasant labor nor had attached estates of workers and servants. They lived as simply as possible and Nilus had avoided the political and ecclesiastical intrigues that flourished in the feudal milieu of the day. He was well outside the ecclesiastical Machiavellianism that pitted abbots and bishops and clerics against each other.

No one expected this simple, learned man, shy and retiring, and seemingly engaged in activities far from the concerns of the world, to stand and challenge the abuses of power and the land system that prevailed among the monastic community.

The Non-possessors

As the gathered clerics sat stunned, listening to his heartfelt appeal for a return to spiritual simplicity and austerity, they realized he had called for the destruction of the churches property system as it existed. Joseph, who was a strong supporter of large monastic properties and communities, and who had left the assembly, was brought back by his colleagues to challenge the position put forth by Nilus.

Joseph had been on the opposite side of the fence during the hearings about the Judaizers, and he and Nilus had different views about the spiritual responsibility of the church. Joseph had a much broader and specific agenda concerning the role of the church in Russian politics and power struggles, while Nilus advised the monks to return to their vows of poverty, prayer and devotion.

If contemplation was the primary reason for monks to gather into prayerful communities, then it would be best not to be encumbered by the concerns of running vast estates, questions of peasant labor and servitude, and the incredible amount of time it took to govern the villages attached to the monastic and church properties. The personal wealth that many abbots and monks acquired, along with the accompanying prestige and power, not only got in the way of their vows of poverty, but also greatly hindered them in their sacred journey toward God.

Nilus, along with the clerics and monks who supported him, became known as the Non-Possessors. They served as the conscience which reminded the Russian Church of the need for simplicity and humility in relation to God, property, prayer and the devotional communities they hoped would enrich the spiritual life of the Russian people.

The Non-possessors constantly reminded the church of the tradition of the early fathers, the role of hesychastic prayer as propagated on Mt. Athos and the primacy of the Gospel and epistles in establishing a strong foundation of devotion.

No gold or silver ornaments

Whenever in doubt, Nilus always returned to the gospel and prayed and meditated for understanding of the material he read. This was the primary source of his great vision and call of return to the basics of the Trinitarian tradition and the simple Christian path of the early church.

The powerbrokers had everything to lose. They consolidated their power and called on Joseph to lead them in rebutting the arguments of the Non-possessors. Joseph and his circle of supporters were called the Possessors.

They strongly favored both the rise of monastic community landholdings, and the increasing powerful role of the church in relation to the governing of the newly consolidated and rising Russian state. They supported the nobility and large estate owners and received both real land and political power as part of their continued support. Joseph himself received some seven villages from the See of Grannidis as a way of thanking him for his support and leadership.

The two camps served to moderate some of the extremes of each others position. The Non-possessors were often accused of a type of "puritanism" in relation to the ornamentation of the church and even questioned the spiritual value of the many jeweled Icons that most large monasteries possessed. It is said Nilus wanted no gold or silver ornaments, vessels or sacramental chalices in his small, rough-hewn chapel.

Though they were certainly not iconoclasts, the Non-possessors encouraged a more simple form of architectural embellishment and iconography. Nilus felt that the beauty of the sanctuary could actually detract the worshiper from prayer and the development of their personal relationship to God.

Struggle to become as Christ

After Nilus presented his concerns and council to the Synod, he simply returned to the wilderness he knew was also his refuge.

The futility of the battle was seen in the greed and power which already inundated the structure and hierarchy of the large monastic communities. The vast land holdings and the development of the formalist and ritualist position within the church had already begun to "depersonalize" the Mystery of the sacred relationship between man and God. For Nilus, the church was fast becoming the very world he sought to escape. It was an institution which had turned to look away from God to the concerns of business and power and politics.

When he returned to the dark wet world of his skete and the few monks who had gathered to learn his way toward God, he retired finally from the world. He opened the door to his cell and came home to the prayerful contemplation that was the center of his life. It is that example of return he has left the world.

The constant reminder that one always must turn and return toward God. It doesn't matter how powerful and wealthy and imbued with the pleasures of the world one has become. The heart must always return to God and the power of the Holy Spirit and the example of Christ.

If anything remains of his legacy beyond the specifics of the Non-possessors in history, a history of both a nation and a church, it is the call of Saint Nilus of Sora to turn toward God. That legacy is beyond time and space and beacons us all to a wilderness where our hearts can contemplate the great good being of the Divine and where each of us must struggle to become as Christ, basing our lives on the simplicity of love and truth and forgiveness.

St. Nilus died in the year 1508 at the age of 75. He left behind his last will and instruction to his disciples.

"I, unworthy Nil, entreat my superiors and brethren who are of the same spirit as myself to carry out this last will of mine. After my death, throw my body out into the desert so that there the animals and birds may devour it, for it has so basely sinned against God and is unworthy of a burial. If they do not do this, then dig a hole on the place where we live and bury me in it with every kind of abuse. Fear the words which the great Arsenius commanded his followers, saying: 'I will call you before judgement if you give my body to anyone.' It has always been my earnest striving as far as my strength allowed to receive no honor or praise in this monastery life, so be it after my death. I beg all to pray for my sinful soul, and I ask pardon from all as I forgive all. May God pardon us all."

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