

THE LIFE OF  
*Saint Nilus of Sora*  
AND HIS SKETE TRADITION

St. Nilus, with his example of almost impossibly simple and severe monastic life, has not been surrounded with the historical glory of some of the other great founders of monasteries in Russia, and his Life was lost very early. Nonetheless, the main outlines of his life are known, and they are here presented as translated from the Patericon of St. Sergius' Holy Trinity Monastery, published by the Monastery in 1896. Other material has been added, as indicated in the footnotes. The troparion on the opposite page is the earliest known of the several composed in his honor and dates at least to the 17th century.

**S**AIN NILUS was for Russian monasticism an instructor and writer such as Sts. Isaac the Syrian, Abba Dorotheus, Barsanuphius the Great, John of the Ladder, Nilus of Sinai, and other Holy Fathers were for Orthodox monasticism in general. He came from the noble\* family of Maikov, was born in 1433, and made the beginning of his monastic life in the monastery of St. Cyril of White Lake,\*\* where he lived under the instruction of the strict elder Paisius Yaroslavov, who was later abbot of St. Sergius' Holy Trinity Monastery and refused the office of Metropolitan. However, the life of the White Lake Monastery had greatly declined since the repose of its holy founder, as St. Nilus indicates in a letter which has come down to us: "Was not my departure from the (White Lake) monastery 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."

And so, in search of the true sources of Orthodox monastic life, St. Nilus went to the holy places of the East. Taking with him his disciple and

\* The attempt of some scholars to disprove the generally accepted view of St. Nilus' noble origins is based on a single line from one of the Saint's epistles: "Of myself I dare do nothing, as I am an ignoramus and peasant..." But in all probability the Saint here is not speaking literally, but rather is using a humble figure of speech. It is surely significant that all three of the Saint's disciples who are known to us were of the nobility.

\*\* †1429, June 9. For his Life, see *The Orthodox Word*, 1972, no. 3.



SAINT NILUS OF SORA  
*Commemorated April 7 and May 7*

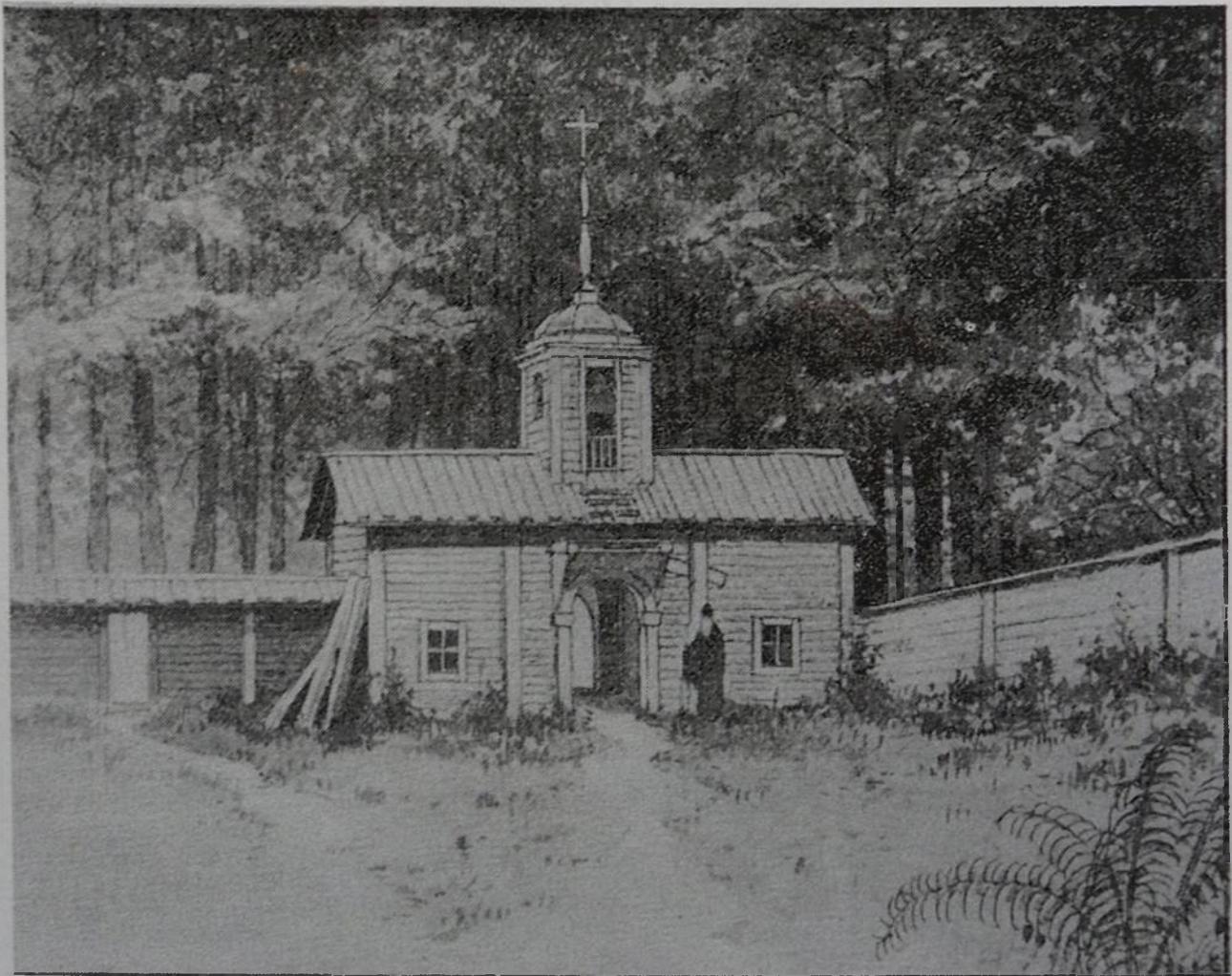
TROPARION, TONE 1

FLEEING the world as David\* and regarding everything in it as dirt,\* thou didst settle in a place of silence,\* being filled with spiritual joy, O our Father Nilus,\* and didst will to serve the One God in solitude.\* Thou didst blossom as the palm tree and as the fruit-bearing vine,\* multiplying thy children in the wilderness.\* Wherefore in thanksgiving we cry out:\*

Glory be to Him Who chose thee as a praiseworthy rule for anchorites in Russia,\* glory be to Him Who strengthened thee in the wilderness,\*  
glory be to Him Who saveth us by thy prayers.



On the road from  
St. Cyril's Monastery  
to St. Nilus' Skete:  
Pilgrims stop to rest  
by the Cross which  
marks the beginning  
of the side-road to  
St. Nilus' Skete



SAINT NILUS' SKETE:  
The entrance-tower of the Skete of the Forerunner, seen from inside

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fellow-laborer, St. Innocent of Komel,\* who was of the noble family of Okhlebinin, he spent several years on Mt. Athos, where there was the Russian monastery of Xylurgou (near the present Skete of the Prophet Elias), and in the monasteries of Constantinople. Here St. Nilus studied all forms of monastic asceticism, and in particular the form of *skete-life*, which he had not known up to then. Most importantly, he strove everywhere to enter into the meaning and spirit of the so-called *mental monastic work*, the inward self-trial and practice of the Jesus Prayer, applying everything to his own spiritual life. He attentively studied and applied in experience the teachings of the Divinely-wise Holy Fathers; Sts. Anthony the Great, Ephraim and Isaac of Syria, Barsanuphius, John of the Ladder, Abba Dorotheus, Maximus the Confessor, Hesychius, Simeon the New Theologian, Peter Damascene, and Gregory, Nilus, and Philotheus of Sinai.

On Mt. Athos the intention was born in him to start, on returning to his homeland, the new (to Russia) skete form of life according to the example of the Eastern monks. Before him there had been two forms of monasticism in Russia; the *cœnobitic* and the *hermitic*. St. Nilus made the beginning of the third form: the middle path of asceticism, where a few monks would settle such a distance apart that they could still hear each other's voices but labored each by himself.

Returning to White Lake Monastery, St. Nilus did not remain to live in it, but built himself a cell out of logs not far from it. Later he went some ten miles away, to the river Sorka or Sora. The place which St. Nilus chose for his Skete was wild, dark, desolate. The river Sora barely flows through this marshy, low-lying region, and it resembles more a swamp than a river. There is forest all around. Here, having erected a cross, St. Nilus built at first a chapel and a solitary cell and dug a well; and when several brothers had gathered together to live with him he built a wooden church in honor of the Meeting of the Lord (Feb. 2). Later another wooden church dedicated to St. John the Forerunner was added. Nearby he built a mill.

From this Skete St. Nilus wrote to his friend St. Innocent: "When we were living together with you in the monastery (of St. Cyril), you know how I avoided worldly ties and strove to live according to the Holy Scripture, even though in my slothfulness I did not succeed in this. At the end of my wandering I came again to the monastery, built a cell near it, and lived as best I could. Now I have resettled far from the monastery and have found by God's grace a place according with my ideas, a place little accessible to worldly people, as you yourself have seen. Living in solitude, I occupy myself with searching the spiritual writings: above all I search the Lord's commandments and

\* †1521, March 19.

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their commentaries, and the Apostolic traditions; then the Lives and instructions of the Holy Fathers. I reflect on all this, and whatever I find after reflection to be God-pleasing and useful for my soul, I copy out for myself. In this is my life and breath. As for my infirmity and sloth, I place my hope in God and the Most Pure Mother of God. If there is something for me to undertake, and if I find nothing about it in Scripture, I lay it aside for a time until I do find something. I do not presume to undertake anything at all on my own will and according to my own judgment. Whether you live as a hermit or in cœnobitic life, pay heed to the Holy Scripture and follow in the footsteps of the Fathers, or be in subjection to one who is known to you as a spiritual man in word, life, and judgment. The Holy Scripture is harsh only for one who does not wish to humble himself by fear of God and depart from earthly ways of thinking, but rather desires to live according to his own passionate will. Others do not wish humbly to search the Holy Scripture, do not wish even to hear of how one should live, as if the Scripture were not written for us or need not be put into practice in our time. But for true ascetic strugglers in the present time and in all times, the words of the Lord will always be words as pure as refined silver; the Lord's commandments for them are dearer than gold and precious stones, sweeter than honey and the honeycomb."

Both for himself and for his disciples, St. Nilus established the strict rules of skete-life. For the building of the first church of his Skete, a raised place had to be made by filling in the marshy ground, all the more because the monastery's sepulchre was to be under the church. By the hands of the Divinely-wise Elder and the skete-dwellers who lived with him, a high mound was made for the church and sepulchre. Cells were placed on this mound, each a stone's throw from the others and from the church. The skete-dwellers gathered in their church, following the example of the Eastern Fathers, only on Saturdays, Sundays, and feast days; on other days each prayed and labored in his own cell. The All-night Vigil of the Skete continued literally the whole night; after each kathisma of the Psalter there were three or four readings from the Holy Fathers. At the Liturgy only the Trisagion, Alleluia, Cherubic Hymn, and Meet It Is were sung; everything else was chanted, slowly. On Saturdays the monks went to the monastery sepulchre, where a panikhida was served for the repose of the departed.

In his Rule to his disciples, St. Nilus thus depicts the outward side of skete-life: "(1) (The monks) should earn their livelihood by the labor of their own hands, but should not occupy themselves with agriculture, since because of its complexity it is not suited to hermits. (2) They should accept alms only in case of illness or extreme need, but not any alms that might serve to give offense to anyone. (3) They should not leave the Skete. (4) In church

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there should be no adornments made of silver, even for the sacred vessels, but everything should be simple. (5) The young and healthy should wear out the body with fasting, thirst, and labor, while to the old and weak a relaxation is permitted to a certain extent. (6) No women at all are to enter the Skete."

These rules for outward life are not complex. The labor and asceticism of skete-life consist primarily of inward ascetic labor, a strict observation of the conditions of the soul, the purification of the soul by prayer and thought of God. This form of asceticism St. Nilus depicts in some detail in his Rule for his disciples, an extensive work which is called "The Tradition from the Holy Fathers on How to Live," or the "Rule of Skete-life." The characteristic that distinguishes this "Tradition" or Rule of St. Nilus of Sora from all other Rules written by the founders of monasteries is precisely that St. Nilus concentrates all attention on *inward* spiritual life in Christ, on the purely spiritual training of the Orthodox Christian.

THE GLORY OF ST. NILUS shone out far beyond the walls of Russian monasteries. He was known and revered by Russian hierarchs. When the heresy of the Judaizers broke out in Novgorod and the expectation spread everywhere that the world would end in 1492 (the year 7000 from the creation of the world), St. Gennadius, Archbishop of Novgorod,\*\*\* asked Ioasaph, Archbishop of Rostov, to take counsel from St. Nilus (as well as from Paisius Yaroslavov) concerning his idea of these expectations. In 1490 a council was convoked against the heresy of the Judaizers, and the Elders Paisius and Nilus were invited to Moscow to the council. There was another council in Moscow in 1503, and St. Nilus was present at this council also. It is worthy of note that it was St. Nilus who introduced into this council's discussions the proposal that monasteries should be relieved of the governance of patrimonial estates, i.e., the owning of villages. This question raised heated discussions. St. Joseph, Abbot of Volokolamsk,\* an eminent church figure of the time, defended monastery possessions. But the Blessed Nilus, proposing that monasteries should not own villages, demanded that "monks should live in the wilderness and earn their livelihood by handiwork." Many monks of St. Cyril's White Lake Monastery,\*\* and even some monks of other monasteries, joined themselves to St. Nilus' opinion. However, this opinion was not upheld at the council. After the death of St. Nilus, his idea lived on for a long time in the minds of his disciples. One of them, Prince Bassian Kosoi, fought strongly

\*\*\* †1505, Dec. 4.

\* †1515, Sept. 9.

\*\* St. Cyril himself, a hundred years earlier, had refused to accept villages for his monastery, as related in his life (*Orthodox Word*, 1972, no. 3, p. 138).

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for the position that monasteries should have no villages, and with him there were other elders, and also monks from the Holy Mountain, including St. Maximus the Greek.\*\*\*

But most important in the life of St. Nilus is that to his very death he remained faithful to his Rule, embodying its principles not only in questions concerning society, such as the question of monastery possessions, but also in his own life and ascetic labors.

Quite some time before his death, St. Nilus, sending his disciple St. Innocent to establish a cœnobitic monastery, prophesied that this monastery would flourish, and referring to his own wilderness Skete he said: "But here, as it was during my lifetime, so let it remain after my death; let the brethren live alone, each in his own cell." These words were preserved as a testament and were observed after the death of St. Nilus. The great Elder departed to the Lord on May 7, 1508, on the third Sunday of Pascha, being 75 years old.

When he was dying, St. Nilus left the following testament to his disciples: "In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. I give as my testament concerning myself to you, my constant lords and brethren who are of my way of life; I beg you, throw my body into the wilderness, that the beasts and birds may devour it, inasmuch as it has sinned much against God and is unworthy of burial. But if you do not do this, then, having dug a hole in the place where we live, bury me with all dishonor. And fear the words which the Great Arsenius gave as his testament to his disciples, saying: I will stand in judgment with you if you give my body to anyone. For it was my concern, in so far as it lay in my power, that I should not be deemed worthy of any honor or glory of this world; as it was in this life, so let it be after my death. And I beg all to pray for my sinful soul, and I beg forgiveness of everyone. and may there be forgiveness also from me: may God forgive us all."

On the part of St. Nilus, this testament serves as an expression of his profound humility before God and men, which is worthy of being expressed in the words of the Prophet David: *I have been humbled, O Lord, exceedingly* (Ps. 118:107).

This desire expressed before his death by the great zealot of poverty and humility was fulfilled: his monastery remained one of the poorest and least populated in the north of Russia; and his holy relics reposed, until late in the 19th century, under a humble wooden church. Once, in 1569, Tsar John the Terrible, having visited and prayed at St. Cyril's monastery, came to St. Nilus' Skete and, having had a moleben served and having praised God and the life of His wonderworker, commanded that a stone church be erected. But at that time St. Nilus himself appeared to him and commanded him not to

\*\*\* †1556, Jan. 21.

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build a stone church, and forbade any kind of adornments to be made either in the churches or in the cells, but commanded that there should be only what was needful. After this apparition the Tsar gave a certificate of bestowal to the Skete with his own signature, giving an allowance of grain and money for the upkeep of the brethren.

The Holy Church, in course of time, by indication from above, joined Nilus to the number of the Holy Fathers and established that his commemoration be kept in the Church Calendar on May 7, the day of his blessed repose.

**T**HREE IS a remarkable tradition concerning the sacred iconographic face of the Saint which is painted on the cover of his tomb. A certain wealthy man of the Moscow territory was captured by Tatars and remained in captivity to them for many years. He greatly sorrowed over his family and called on the saints of God to help him. Once at night there appeared to him in a light sleep a resplendent elder who ordered him to paint the icon of St. Nilus, promising to return him to his homeland. Awakening from sleep, he wanted to ask how this could be done; but the elder vanished like lightning from his sight, which was blinded by the bright light. The prisoner began to reflect to himself: Who is this St. Nilus, of whom he had now heard for the first time, and where is he to be found? He began to call on him for help, even though he did not know him. And behold, the next night the same elder appeared to him again and said: "The Nilus who is near White Lake, ten miles from St. Cyril's monastery." Jumping up from his bed, the prisoner wanted to look more closely at the elder's face and question him in more detail, but again, just as quickly as before, he became invisible, leaving behind a ray of light and a fragrance. Then he believed that indeed the Lord had sent this Saint to him, and he prayed St. Nilus that he would reveal his face more clearly to him; and on the third night the Saint again appeared to him and left near his head an outline of his face and spoke to him this word of consolation: "Man of God, take this leaf and go into the Russian land."

Scarcely had the consoled prisoner come to himself than he actually found by his pillow the outline of the Saint's face. With tears he begged the Lord and His Saint to show him the path by which to be delivered from the hands of the unbelievers; and again a voice came to him: "Go at night into the steppe and you will see before you a bright star; follow it and you will escape the Hagarenes." The prisoner, strengthened by faith, boldly set out at night into the immeasurable, unknown steppe, taking with him a little bread, and a wondrous star led him, according to the promise of St. Nilus, until the first rays of dawn. Then he heard behind him the trampling of horses' hoofs and the yells of barbarians seeking their prey. In terror he fell to the ground,

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begging God to preserve him, and the Lord overshadowed him with invisible power from their gaze, so that with cries they passed by.

The prisoner wandered day and night over the shelterless steppe, and then he came to a deep and rapid river, although it was not wide, and there was no one to take him across, and it flowed across the whole steppe. The barbarians knew that it was impossible to cross the river, and they chased him to its banks in the firm conviction that they would catch the fugitive. Catching sight of him from afar, they strove towards him with wild yells and bared swords, and he, seeing no deliverance for himself anywhere, signed himself with the sign of the cross and threw himself into the river. The waters carried him quickly downstream, and the Hagarenes shot arrows at him from the bank in vain, for the mercy of God preserved him. The river carried him faster than their horses could run, and they returned, considering him already drowned. But the river, in a dashing of waves, threw the man out on the opposite bank, and from there he walked across the steppe without hindrance, living on plants and ceaselessly calling in his prayers on the Lord and His Saint, Nilus.

This river was probably the Donetz, which at that time served as the boundary between Russia and the Crimean Horde. The rescued prisoner successfully reached the Russian cities. Before he went to his father's house he sought out an icon-painter in Moscow and ordered him to paint the Saint's face for him from the leaf that had been given him, the size of the cover of a coffin; then he called priests and poor people and, having given them a dinner, furnished them with generous alms, telling everyone how the Lord had delivered him from captivity. And when the icon of the Saint had been painted, he made a great festivity in honor of St. Nilus and sent the honorable icon to his Skete with a faithful servant, giving many gifts and church utensils to the Skete. This icon lay on the Saint's shrine right up to this century and, by the prayers of St. Nilus, healings flow forth from it. The Saint is depicted in schema, in the splendid repose of the contemplation after death which he had begun while still on earth.

Many other miracles occurred through the intercession of St. Nilus after his repose. Here is another remarkable miracle, as recorded by the monks of St. Nilus' Skete: "Once there was living in St. Nilus' Skete a certain hieromonk Adam, and his son Michael lived with him. The hieromonk sent the boy to the sacristan for some church needs, and while he was on his way there suddenly came to him a certain strange man who seized him and carried him, as if on the wind, into an impenetrable forest, bringing him into a large room in his dwelling and placing him in the middle of this cabin, in front of the window. And that old man told the woman there to feed the boy, and they

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brought him every kind of wild plant and tried to make him eat and drink. But the boy ate nothing, but only stood in the same spot where he had been placed, unmoving, weeping and lamenting bitterly. The hieromonk soon began looking for his son and looked everywhere in the Skete and in nearby places without finding him anywhere. And so he came to the Skete and gathered the brethren and went with everyone to the chapel which stands not far away in the forest, where there is the wonderworking Icon of the Most Holy Mother of God Hodigitria, and began to serve a moleben and call with tears on St. Nilus the Wonderworker to help. And at that moment St. Nilus came to the boy's aid and stood before the room where the boy was standing, and when he struck the window-frame with his staff the building was shaken and all the unclean spirits fell to the earth. The boy, standing and weeping, saw St. Nilus the Wonderworker standing under the window and saying: 'O miserable unclean spirits! Why are you attacking my Skete? Take this boy back to my Skete from which you took him and place him in the same spot.' And having said this, the Saint became invisible. And the unclean spirits began to howl among themselves at the one who had brought the boy to them: 'Woe to us who are perishing! Quickly take the boy and bring him back where you took him from!' The same strange one seized the boy and brought him to the Skete like the wind, as far as the Skete's mill, for he did not dare to bring him into the Skete; and placing him on a haystack, he became invisible. The boy began to cry out on the haystack, and at that moment the hieromonk with the brethren, coming from the moleben in the chapel, heard the boy crying out in the forest and came to the sound and saw the boy standing on the haystack; and they glorified God and His Saint, Nilus the Wonderworker, and began to question the boy. The boy told them everything that had happened to him, what he had seen and heard. And from that time this boy became very humble, as if he had been stupefied. The hieromonk out of terror left the Skete with his son. We sinful monks of the Skete saw and heard all this in detail from this boy, and we wrote down a little out of the much that we heard so that our brethren will remember, for the benefit of those who love God and glorify the Holy Trinity, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, now and ever and unto the ages of ages. Amen."\*

\* A. S. Archangelsky, *St. Nilus of Sora*, St. Petersburg, 1882, App., pp. 8-10. If any contemporary reader regard this miracle as "fanciful," he should read the account (which was seen and approved by Starets Ambrose of Optina) of an even stranger demonic "kidnapping" in 19th-century Russia, where a young man, after his mother cursed him, became the slave of a demon "grandfather" for twelve years. (See S. Nilus, *The Power of God and Man's Weakness*, St. Sergius' Lavra, 1908, pp. 279-298.)

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IN ACCORDANCE with the principles of skete-life, the number of monks in St. Nilus' Skete was always small. During his lifetime this number attained no more than one hieromonk, one deacon, and twelve monks. Doubtless the intention of St. Nilus in blessing his disciple St. Innocent to found a cœnobitic monastery was to keep his own skete small.

In addition to St. Innocent, another Saint known to have been under the influence of St. Nilus was St. Cassian of Uglich,\*\* a Greek prince from Constantinople to whom St. Nilus wrote two letters which have been preserved. He founded his own monastery on the Volga. The influence of St. Nilus seems also to be present in the Rule of St. Cornelius of Komel.\*\*\*

The direct influence of St. Nilus on Russian monasticism, however, is difficult to trace, and it is actually of secondary importance beside the one undeniable fact that the contemplative monastic tradition of the North is based entirely on the Eastern Fathers of Greece, Syria, Palestine, and Egypt. The Skete Rule of St. Nilus (besides which only a few of his letters and his brief "Testament" survive) is wholly in the tradition of these Fathers and consists largely of citations from them. St. Nilus himself says: "Like a dog picking up scraps from the table, I have gathered the words uttered by those blessed Fathers..."

The subject of the Skete Rule is primarily, as we have seen, not the outward order of the monastery, but the inward activity of the monk. The Holy Fathers call this activity the "mental work," which means the practice of the Orthodox spiritual life, centering on the Prayer of Jesus. After an introduction emphasizing that all outward, bodily labors are precisely for the purpose of purifying the "inner vessel," St. Nilus gives an outline of the inward spiritual battle, which occurs in the mind, in the realm of thoughts. The victory or defeat which the Orthodox Christian sustains here is then translated into the virtues or vices which can be observed outwardly.

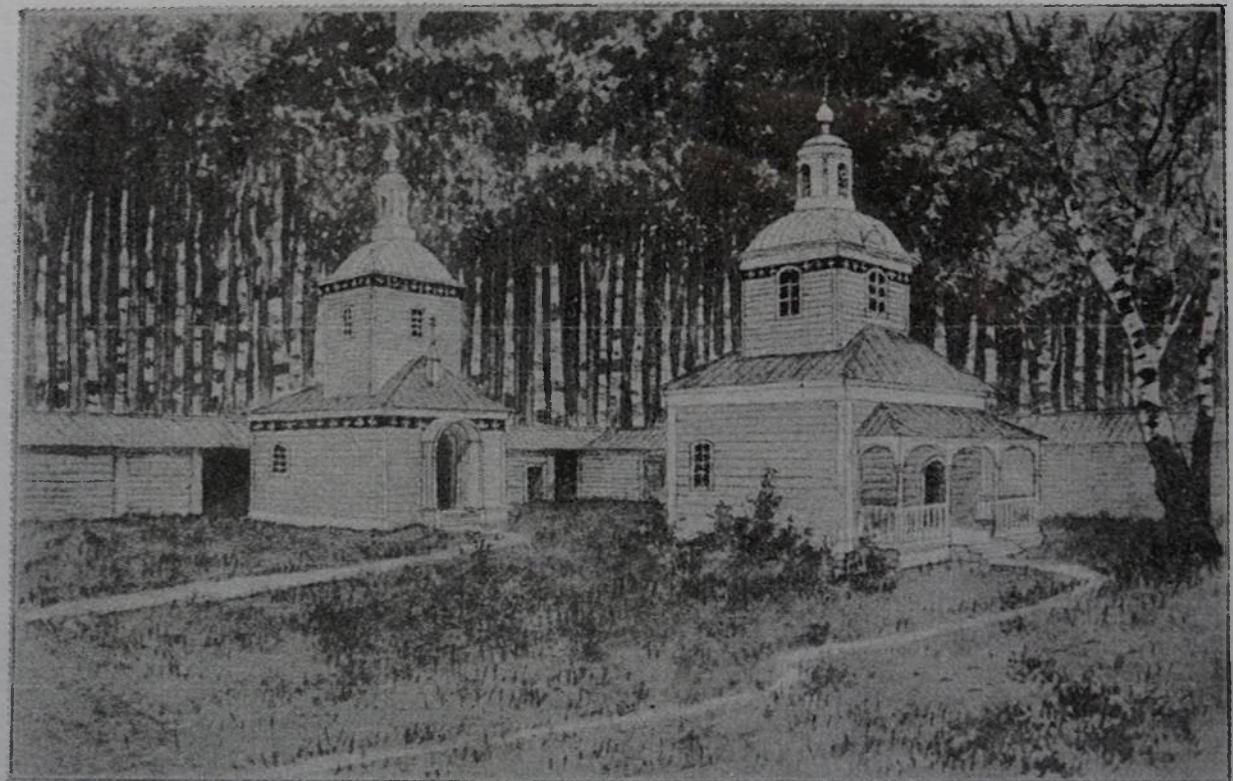
Five degrees can be distinguished in the battle as one is led away from God-pleasing purity of mind: (1) A simple thought or suggestion (in Slavonic, *prilog*) which comes to the mind from outside; not depending upon us, such fleeting thoughts are not sinful in themselves, and even the spiritually perfect are not entirely free of them. (2) "Conjunction" (*sochetanie*) or conversation with the thought, granting it permission to come within, receiving and holding it in the mind. This may be done with or without passion, and so may be sinful or sinless, depending on the outcome. (3) "Joining" (*slozhenie*) or accepting the thought, being defeated by it; this is judged more or less severely depending on one's state of advancement in spiritual

\*\* †1504, Oct. 2.

\*\*\* †1537, May 19.

St. Nilus in his  
marshy wilderness

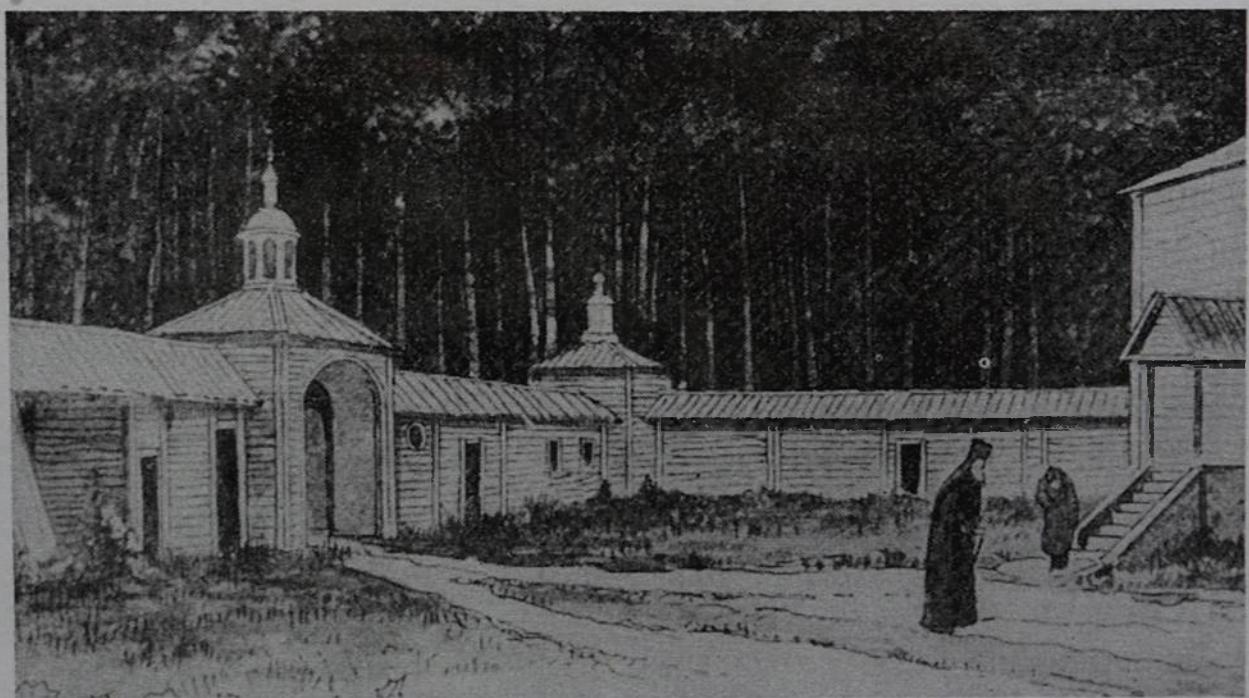
19th-century  
line engraving



The Golgotha and Gethsemene Chapels in St. Nilus' Dormition Skete



The Skete of St. John the Forerunner, showing the old church of the Forerunner, originally built over St. Nilus' grave, and the house built over the well of St. Nilus



The entrance tower and the walls of the Dormition Skete, seen from inside

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life and on the basic orientation of one's heart: one may be defeated in thought yet still be determined not to sin in act; or one may accept the thought to such an extent that one is prepared to act according to its suggestion, in which case a penance (*epitimia*) should be given by one's spiritual father. (4) "Captivity" (*plenenie*) is an involuntary attraction of one's heart to the thought, from which state one may be freed and return to oneself with God's help; or, more seriously, the thought constantly settles in one's mind and the mind, carried away from its good orientation into evil thoughts, can no longer return to a peaceful state. (5) "Passion" (*strast'*) is an inclination and activity that have nested themselves in the soul for a long time because of habit and become as it were the soul's nature. A man comes to this state at first voluntarily, but ends by being completely enslaved by it. "Passion" must be subject to penance in this life, or it will bring tortures in the future life.

Further, St. Nilus in his Skete Rule describes how to conduct the fight against evil thoughts, indicating also some of the experiences that may come to one on the path to spiritual perfection, and gives certain general rules of life for one engaged in this struggle. Then he names the eight principal passions from which, the Holy Fathers teach, the many others proceed, and tells how to fight the temptations that come with each of them. These passions are: gluttony, fornication, cupidity, anger, sorrow, despondency, vainglory, and pride.

The Rule concludes with separate sections on the thought of death and the Last Judgment; on tears; on renunciation and detachment; and on discretion and moderation in the practice of the spiritual life.\*

THE SKETE of St. Nilus always remained small and humble, as its founder had wished it to be. However, as with all monasteries the state of its spiritual life was not always high, and in the first half of the 19th century in particular the Skete was in a condition of great decay, both spiritually and physically. It was at this time that God raised up a great ascetic who made St. Nilus' Skete once more renowned for its flourishing spiritual life. Even though

\* The Skete Rule of St. Nilus has been translated into English and printed in G. P. Fedotov, *A Treasury of Russian Spirituality*, Sheed & Ward, New York, 1948, pp. 90-132. However, the reader can place no trust in the introductions and comments of the "liberal" scholar Fedotov, who has no understanding whatever of Orthodox spirituality and its tradition and thus looks pointlessly for "originality" in the Saint's "literary work," disdains the "merely traditional accounts" contained in the Lives of Saints of this period (it was precisely from this rich source that I. M. Kontzevitch wrote the best work on the Russian spiritual tradition, *The Acquisition of the Holy Spirit in Ancient Russia*), and finds it significant that St. Nilus was "the favorite saint of the Russian liberal intelligentsia"!



Schema-hieromonk Nilus

he did not restore everything according to the letter of St. Nilus' testament, and in one respect acted contrary to his express desire—nonetheless, in his life and spirit, and even in the physical surroundings of his last years of skete-life, after St. Nilus' "chastisement" of him, one may catch a glimpse of the spirit of the great founder of skete-life in Russia and breathe a little of the fragrance of the isolated wooden sketes of the North. Indeed, it is not by accident that this new ascetic of St. Nilus' Skete should likewise bear the name of *Nilus of Sora*.

Schema-hieromonk Nilus (1801-1870) was born of devout Orthodox parents. His father was in correspondence with Blessed

Paisius Velichkovsky, the new zealot of the Holy Fathers and of the monastic "mental work" by no means second even to St. Nilus, and the disciples of Elder Paisius often visited his house. Living in various monasteries, Father Nicon (his name in monasticism) occupied responsible positions in them; but all the time his heart was weighed down with his worldly cares and he sought a more isolated place for ascetic labors. By God's Providence he was directed to the Skete of St. Nilus, which was then dependent on St. Cyril's White Lake Monastery, and the abbot of the latter was only too happy to place him in charge of restoring the Skete.

The sight that greeted Father Nicon at St. Nilus' Skete was truly a sad one: the two old churches on the mound which St. Nilus had made, as well as the other skete buildings, were in bad condition, some of them falling to pieces; only St. Nilus' mill on the Sora was more or less whole. But what was far worse, the eight monks who lived in the Skete were far from models of sober monastic life, and they were not disposed to being corrected by their new superior. Indeed, just outside the Skete Father Nicon ran into a group of laughing and singing women who had been working in the monastery for the brethren! Nonetheless, the remoteness and desolateness of the Skete, its humble churches, and the grave of St. Nilus (who was buried under the wooden church of the Forerunner) attracted the soul of Father Nicon; and soon St. Nilus himself appeared to him during sleep, conversing with him and commanding him not to refuse to become superior, and promising to help him.

Becoming superior in 1837, Father Nicon introduced a strict monastic rule and in three years had restored the buildings and built a fence around the Skete enclosure. Some 20 monks joined him. Next to the well and pond which St. Nilus himself had dug, he built a chapel and a small cell for his own solitary labors.

Soon many pilgrims began to visit the Skete, and here Father Nicon succumbed to the temptation which the abbot of St. Cyril's monastery proposed: to build a large stone church in place of the two small wooden ones. The biographer of Father Nicon does not say so, but it is obvious from the events that followed that St. Nilus, who once had threatened John the Terrible for the very idea of building a stone church in his Skete, chastised those who presumed to act against his express desire. Before the stone church could be finished, the abbot of St. Cyril's monastery was removed from his post and Father Nicon was banished in disgrace and under interdiction to a distant monastery for having kept in his cell without reporting it some human bones (very clean and fragrant, with drops of myrrh, evidently those of a holy monk of the Skete) which had been found when the wooden churches had been dismantled and the whole area of the mound with the old sepulchre had been levelled. Further, during the course of the construction of the stone church, the arches holding up the central dome collapsed, and with them a 16-year-old boy fell from the roof and was buried by bricks; it was by an evident miracle of St. Nilus that he was found under the rubble completely unharmed.\*

In his banishment Father Nicon fell almost into despair, being encouraged, however, by a voice from an Icon of the Mother of God which told him that he would return to St. Nilus' Skete and receive the great schema. And in fact, in three years he was allowed to return to his beloved Skete, but now not to be superior, but rather to retire to his own little skete near St. Nilus' well, to which place Father Nicon had previously removed the dismantled wooden church of the Forerunner which had stood over St. Nilus' grave at least since the 17th century. This church gave the name to this second skete of St. Nilus: the Skete of the Forerunner.



*Rasophore-monk John*

*(Continued on page 217)*

\* This incident is recorded by A. Muraviev, *The Russian Thebaid of the North*, St. Petersburg, 1855, pp. 353-354.

# Saint Nilus of Sora

(Continued from page 211)

In 1852 Father Nicon received the schema with the name of Nilus, in honor of the great founder of the Skete, and now he began a life which in many respects resembled that of his patron saint. Especially after 1861, when he founded a second, less accessible skete (the Dormition or Gethsemene Skete, dedicated to the Mother of God) farther on in the forest, he led the strict life of a hermitic skete-dweller. Women were never allowed inside the skete enclosure, and even when he should happen to meet women pilgrims outside the enclosure, Father Nilus would never converse with them, but only give his blessing in silence. His contact with the world was limited to writing replies to spiritual questions on pieces of paper which would be delivered by his cell-attendant. His All-night Vigils followed Athonite custom and lasted, as in the days of St. Nilus, the whole night, twelve hours and more. He constantly read the Holy Fathers and made their thought his own; his spiritual instructions to his brethren were filled with references to them. His rule differed from that of St. Nilus in that he served Liturgy every day, for which rarely did more than two or three monks join him. The church and two chapels which he built, as well as the other buildings and the fences enclosing his sketes, were all of wood. In the ancient church of the Forerunner he collected all the old icons and church utensils of St. Nilus' Skete, and he himself painted many new icons in strict Byzantine style — for he had learned this art in his youth. In a word, while St. Nilus' Skete itself became an ordinary cœnobitic monastery with a very unremarkable stone church, Father Nilus' small sketes carried on as much as possible the tradition of St. Nilus himself.

Father Nilus labored greatly for the glorification of St. Nilus, painting several icons of him and writing the first service and akathist to him. He also had the intention of writing a service to St. Seraphim of Sarov many years before his canonization; and, as if to emphasize the spiritual connection between the two great desert-dwellers — St. Nilus of the 15th and St. Seraphim of the 19th century — Father Nilus died on the very date of St. Seraphim's canonization, only 33 years before the event (July 19, 1870). In his skete, as remote and desolate as the old sketes of the northern forests, Father Nilus ended his life of great sanctity, revealing gifts of clairvoyance and healing. He appeared after his death to his spiritual father, telling him: "Do not grieve for me; I have been deemed worthy of God's mercy." The Abbess of a nearby convent likewise appeared in sleep to one of the nuns, telling her to inform the sisters that she was now in the blessed dwelling prepared for Elder Nilus.\*

\* The full life of Father Nilus (and briefer lives of some of his co-ascetics) is contained in: Bishop Nikodim (the new martyr), *Lives of Russian Ascetics of the 18th and 19th Centuries*, Moscow, 1908, July volume, pp. 278-379.

## THE ORTHODOX WORD

A number of other holy ascetics also flourished at this time in St. Nilus' Skete. One of the most remarkable of these ascetics was the *Rasophore-monk John Shaposhnikov* (1802-1863), a cripple who labored in the Skete of the Forerunner and in a solitary cell in the forest. He was chosen of God from his youth, walked on water, vanquished the demons after undergoing ferocious attacks from them, was granted several wondrous visions, and was visited and healed by the Most Holy Mother of God Herself. Once, when he had first come to St. Nilus' Skete and was still sorrowing over being forced to leave the monastery of St. Cyril of New Lake because he was a cripple, he was standing in great sadness in church for the All-night Vigil of a major feast in winter. Suddenly he saw an unknown elder in schema come out of the altar to him and say: "Well, apparently you do not wish to serve me. If so, return to St. Cyril." At these words the elder struck him with his right hand quite strongly on the shoulder. John wished to bow down to him and ask who he was, but he instantly became invisible. Noting that the elder exactly resembled St. Nilus as he is depicted in the icon over his relics, John was filled with great joy, all his grief disappeared, and he firmly resolved to spend the rest of his life in the Saint's Skete. On the place where Father Nilus was soon to build his Dormition Skete, he saw one night a fiery pillar and he heard angels singing, "Glory to God in the Highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men." After beholding this vision for a long time, he prophesied the future spiritual glory of this place, which indeed came to pass.

After the death of Father Nilus, one of his disciples, *Schema-hieromonk John* (1830-1903), continued to live in his Sketes, at first in the Skete of the Forerunner, and then, for the eight years before his death, in the Dormition Skete, whose spiritual glory thus did not cease right up to our own century. He had a great devotion to St. Nilus, especially from the time when, in his youth, he carried the Saint's icon with him while collecting alms for the Skete. Often he would pray for a long time before the icon to the Saint, asking him to help save him from the many temptations that he encountered on these trips. From this icon there were many healings. Father John became widely known as a great ascetic, and many came to him for spiritual advice. In the last year of his life he went into complete seclusion in his cell in the Dormition Skete. His final wish was to live to see the canonization of St. Seraphim, for whom he had great veneration, and to die on that day, which was also the date of the repose of his elder, Father Nilus. And in fact, on the very day of St. Seraphim's canonization, July 19, 1903, after Father John had risen from his sick-bed to serve a moleben to the newly-canonized Saint, he departed to the Lord. (Life in Bishop Nikodim, *op. cit.*, Nov., pp. 262-276.)

And so the spiritual testament of St. Nilus has given abundant fruits, and the Saint himself did not cease to visit the place of his earthly labors. With the coming of the Communist Yoke upon the Russian land, nothing is known concerning the fate of his Skete, although most of its buildings are not likely to have survived. Yet the Saint's example remains ever alive, and his prayers do not cease for the suffering race of Christians. By his prayers may we also find salvation! Amen.