

## Contents

Introduction.....	8
1- Brief Historical Overview .....	8
2- Note on the Text and its Authorship.....	11
<i>The Life of Saint Nilus the Younger.....</i>	<i>14</i>
Chapter 1.....	14
Chapter 2.....	23
Chapter 3.....	35
Chapter 4.....	44
Chapter 5.....	57
Chapter 6.....	66
Chapter 7.....	74
Chapter 8.....	81
Chapter 9.....	89
Chapter 10.....	98
Chapter 11.....	106
Chapter 12.....	114
Chapter 13.....	123
Chapter 14.....	132



Italy at the Time of Saint Nilus

# Introduction

## 1- Brief Historical Overview

Born in Rossano, Calabria, Saint Nilus the Younger (910-1005) practiced monasticism in a southern and central Italy whose political, religious, and social landscape looked quite different from the one we find today. In fact, rather than representing a politically unified whole, Italy was divided among different groups. For example, by the time of Nilus' birth, the principalities of Salerno and Benevento, located to the north of Calabria, belonged to the Lombards, a Germanic tribe originating from what is today Hungary, while Sicily had come almost entirely into the possession of the Muslims. From the reconquest of Emperor Justinian (r. 527-565) until the Norman invasions of the 11<sup>th</sup> century, Calabria itself was under Byzantine rule, and Greek was therefore integral to its linguistic fabric.<sup>1</sup>

Greek forms of monasticism became increasingly prominent in southern Italy in the centuries following Justinian's military successes.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the Persian and Arab invasions of Syria, Palestine, and Egypt in the 7<sup>th</sup> century pushed a considerable number of Eastern Christian monks not only to Calabria but also to other places, including Rome and Sicily.<sup>3</sup> Central and southern Italy would continue to see waves of incoming Greek-speaking Christians up to and throughout Nilus' own life. In

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<sup>1</sup> Salvatore Cosentino and Enrico Zanini (2021), p. 5.

<sup>2</sup> von Falkenhausen (2017), pp. 78-81; Enrico Morini (2021), pp. 111-117.

<sup>3</sup> von Falkenhausen, p. 78; Morini, p. 112.

the 8<sup>th</sup> century, monks fleeing the Iconoclastic Controversy<sup>4</sup> made their way from Constantinople to Rome. Additionally, the 10<sup>th</sup> century was marked by the movement of Greek Christians within Italy itself. The Muslim conquest of Sicily impelled local Greek monks to move northward, for example to Latium and Campania, while fear of Muslim attacks or an increased desire for solitude caused some Calabrian Christians to follow suit.<sup>5</sup> As a result of these migrations, Greek monasteries in central and southern Italy, especially in and around Rome, came to rival—and often surpass—their Latin counterparts in eminence if not always in number.<sup>6</sup>

Due at least in part to the diverse origins of these Greek-speaking monks, the monasticism practiced by Nilus and his contemporaries in central and southern Italy was by no means uniform.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, it is possible to outline some common features. To begin with, Nilus and other monks, especially those living in places that had been under extended and consistent Byzantine control, held fast to Eastern liturgical rites and Greek as the language of worship.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, according to the rich Italian hagiographic tradition, including the biography of Saint

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<sup>4</sup> In the context of medieval Christianity, Iconoclasm refers to the opposition to icons, visual representations of Christ, the Virgin Mary, and the saints, that was seen in the East. From roughly 730 until the Second Council of Nicaea in 787, iconoclasts removed or destroyed sacred images from Christian spaces, and venerated of those images were persecuted. In 815, Emperor Leo V's prohibition of icons sparked a second period of Iconoclasm in the East, which would finally come to an end in 843 when icon veneration was supported by Empress Theodora.

<sup>5</sup> von Falkenhausen, p. 78; Morini, p. 113.

<sup>6</sup> Morini, *ibid.* Among the Greek monasteries in Rome that gained considerable prominence was St. Sabbas on the Aventine.

<sup>7</sup> Morini, pp. 106-107; p. 113.

<sup>8</sup> Morini, pp. 106-107; von Falkenhausen, pp. 81.

Nilus presented below, one and the same Greek monk could move between cenobitic (communal) and hesychastic (solitary) practices.<sup>9</sup> For example, John Theristus (1049-1129), born in Palermo, Sicily, lived within the community of a monastery but often isolated himself in a nearby cave to pray.<sup>10</sup>

One could list numerous other features, but it will suffice for the purposes of this introduction to sketch three others which figure prominently in Nilus' *Life*: the centrality of spiritual fathers, rigorous asceticism, and an emphasis on physical and intellectual labour. The spiritual father served as a model and teacher who helped his disciples progress in the cultivation of virtue.<sup>11</sup> For instance, as a young man, Stephen is guided by God to Nilus' dwelling place, where he begins to learn, among other things, self-control. Strict asceticism was a primary means by which such advancement in virtue could be achieved: extended periods of fasting, long nights without sleep, many consecutive genuflections, and more, allowed monks to curb the passions and subject body to soul.<sup>12</sup> Likewise, as Nilus himself believed, dedication to work prevented "temptations and many evils"<sup>13</sup> and was therefore essential to monastic life.

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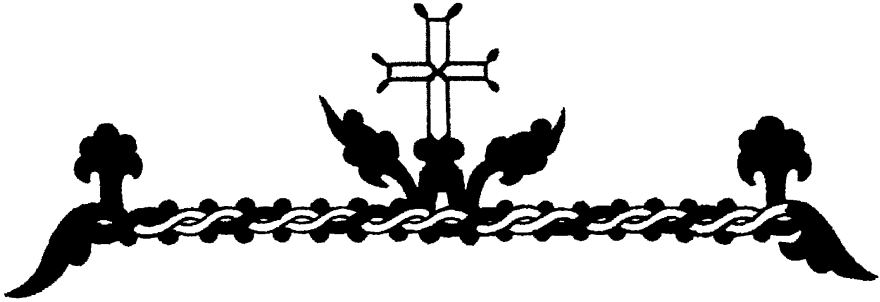
<sup>9</sup> Morini, p. 117; Hester (2017), p. 29.

<sup>10</sup> Hester, *ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Hester, pp. 19-21.

<sup>12</sup> Hester, pp. 24-27.

<sup>13</sup> Chapter 13, section 86. For more on the importance of labour, see Hester, p. 31.



## The Life of Saint Nilus the Younger

### Chapter 1

*The early life of Nilus. He embarks on the monastic life. His encounter with Saracens. The devil appears to him.*

[1] *May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the charity of God the Father, and the communion of the Holy Spirit*<sup>23</sup>—it is indeed good to begin and end with God—be with all those listening diligently as well as my own lowliness and poverty of intellect, as I am about to narrate courageously the life of our holy Father Nilus the Younger. I have not undertaken such an ambitious work for the sake of any man or any man’s appeal or suggestion, since at present, in these latter times of this latest age, people do not seek or busy over such things. On the contrary, many are those who sneer at and are repelled by the subject. They neither believe in the ancient accounts of the saints nor have faith in those things that were recently accomplished. Rather, having completely and utterly closed off, so to speak, the edifying paths, they set one measure for all matters, judging the reliability of the things that are said against their own abilities; and whatever exceeds their own power they suspect of

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<sup>23</sup> 2 Corinthians 13:14

falsehood and think it foreign to the truth. Wherefore, placing the invisible Mind, that is, God the Father, the Co-eternal Word without beginning, and the All-Holy and Consubstantial Spirit as the foundation and beginning of our account, let us begin the narration. Even if it prove useful to no one else, it will be of no small profit and gain to those of us engaging with it and diverting our minds a little from earthly matters, just as perfumers derive pleasure and enjoyment from the handling of fragrances. It is necessary, then, to first discuss the town that gave us this famous Nilus, so that nothing that is needful might be lacking to one who seeks all the details concerning him.

[2] I know that everyone is familiar with the town of Rossano, not only because it lies at the boundaries of Calabria and happens to be both exceedingly great and unassailable, but also because, though this entire region has been devastated and all the cities subjected to the multitude of the Saracens, Rossano alone has managed to escape the infidels' destruction until now. This has not happened as a result of human wisdom or aid but rather through the power and assistance of our Lady the Mother of God, the Ever-Virgin Mary, who overshadows it with particular care. For when the godless Hagarenes<sup>24</sup> were attacking Rossano frequently by night, desiring to take the citadel, and had approached the walls to place ladders against them, it is said that a woman robed in purple appeared to them from above holding torches in her hands; and, casting them down with these, she drove them away from the walls. This is openly confessed by those who fled. Such, then, is the place that gave birth to our holy Father Nilus, and this is where he spent his youth after he had been granted as a gift to his parents by

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<sup>24</sup> That is, the Muslims, who were considered descendants of Hagar through the son she bore to Abraham, Ishmael (Genesis 16:4-15).

God. For he was born to them after their daughter, as they eagerly desired to have a boy; and being brought as an offering to the Lord, they gladly dedicated him to the house of the Mother of God.

Being endowed with an excellent nature, a sharp mind, and a clever intellect, he surpassed all his peers in understanding and in the quality of his answers, in his continuous reading of Scripture, not to mention the questions he posed his teachers, so that the latter marvelled at how such a young child could examine the Scriptures and ask such questions. For even in his youth, he loved to read the Lives of the Holy Fathers, namely, Anthony, Sabbas, Hilary,<sup>25</sup> and the rest who are recognized by the Catholic Church Herself, and he ever pored over them with much yearning and understanding. From these Lives he learned to hate evil, to turn down amusements in the houses of nobles, to despise and avoid all idle curiosity, and to reject those things called amulets and exorcisms. Yet he never lacked books that dealt with these subjects because of his sharpness of mind and zeal to know all things.

[3] Nilus' parents soon departed this life, and his sister began raising him and educating him piously, for she too was very religious even though she had assumed the yoke of marriage. But when he reached the bloom of youth, there was no one, not a bishop, priest, abbot, or monk who took care to bridle him with admonition and lead him towards higher things through constant instruction. For in those days, monastic life around Rossano was sparse, dare I say, detested. The devil, therefore, having realized that Nilus would be the source of much profit

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<sup>25</sup> Saint Anthony the Great (d. 356), Saint Sabbas the Sanctified (d. 532), Saint Hilary of Palestine (d. 371)

## Chapter 9

*Nilus saves Rossano from the wrath of the governor. The devil tempts him with riches.*

[60] The God of the universe gave Nilus the grace not only to relieve and cure each person who came to him afflicted and oppressed by all kinds of evils, but also to assist entire cities in danger and to deliver them from calamities. This will be proved by the following example. At one time, Nicephorus the Magistros<sup>136</sup> was presiding over both lands, namely Italy and our Calabria. He had been the first and only man to be sent there by the pious Emperors to assume this very great office. As a result, the Magistros became so overcome by his nobility and glory that he devised a plan which was acceptable to the minds of men and seemed profitable, but which in reality was opposed to God's will and was by no means acceptable, as its conclusion would show. For he planned to construct galleys for each of Calabria's cities and use them not only to keep the cities extremely secure against attacks, but also to destroy their neighbouring enemy, Sicily.

The citizens of Rossano did not endure this well, since they were unaccustomed to serving on galleys. Therefore, when the ships had been prepared and were about to be brought out to sea, the citizens, kindled by a zealous spirit (they are always more overpowered by this than all other Calabrians), rushed together with fire and a great uproar, burned the ships, and smote the helmsmen on the head. This caused the Magistros to become exceedingly angry and indignant with them because the other towns of Calabria followed their lead and ruined his plan. When those from Rossano recognized this, they censured

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<sup>136</sup> A senior official of the state whose duties were largely ceremonial.

their own thoughtlessness and wrongdoing and deliberated over two possible courses of action: they could either revolt completely and openly disobey the Magistros, thus curing evil with evil, or they could ease the situation by giving him money and a multitude of gifts. Both choices, however, were frightening and grievous to them, so they came up with a different plan that was good and very profitable: they fled to the unshakable tower, that is, to the holy Father, asking him to be their mediator in the affair and to extinguish the ruler's wrath with the persuasion of his virtue.

[61] Without any further delay, the holy man arrived in the town invoking<sup>137</sup> the name of Christ and counselled the inhabitants. Trusting in his seemly advice, they courageously opened the town gates and admitted the Magistros, who was seized by anger and swelling with rage. All were frightened by his countenance—officials, priests and the rest; only God's servant faced him and gave a defence on behalf of everyone. Since the Magistros revered the holy man's virtue and was struck by his divinely-inspired liberty of speech coupled with the grace of the Holy Spirit that shone on his face, he entrusted to Nilus the judgement of Rossano's considerable wrongdoings and damage.

The holy man answered him very mildly and clearly: "I must confess that a highly wicked and inordinate crime has been committed. If the deed had been done by a few powerful men, the perpetrators would certainly be worthy of condemnation and subject to your most wise judgement. But since this was the work of the whole multitude, and the foolishness of the

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<sup>137</sup> The Greek makes a wordplay between ἀναβαλλόμενος (delaying) and προβαλλόμενος (invoking).

wrongdoing is common to all, is it right for you to put so great a throng to the sword and to render such a prominent fortress of God and the Emperor devoid of inhabitants?" The Magistros said, "I shall not put them to the sword, Father. No, I shall not kill anyone. Instead, I shall store up their resources in the imperial coffers, so that in this way, they might be restored to their senses and never dare to attempt even greater plots." "How will it profit your glory," responded the holy man, "if you fill up the imperial coffers but lose your soul? Indeed, how will you be forgiven of your debts not only to the King in heaven but also to the one on earth, if you, who are here today but gone tomorrow, do not forgive those who brazenly and foolishly sin against your authority? But if you do not wish to give up the charge but rightfully contend that this matter can only be decided by the Emperor, allow my unworthiness to write something to his Majesty; and whatever his pious authority should command, we shall enact with great eagerness."

[62] When he had heard these things, the Magistros answered: "Most holy man, knowing the opinion that the holy Emperor has of you, I remit you the payment of such a large debt, which exceeds more than two thousand coins. But it is neither reasonable nor just to overlook the citizens' violence against the commanders and their dishonourable execution." Then the all-blessed man, through exhortation and advice persuaded the Magistros to generously forgive even this sum, which amounted to just under five-hundred coins. When these things had been brought to a fortunate conclusion with the help of the holy Father, the Magistros' anger was turned to the one who had been serving as superintendent in those days, a man called Gregory Maleinus. The blessed one managed to bring the latter before the Magistros with great struggle and entreaty, since he

had been hiding. Seeing Gregory, and being unable to vent his boiling rage against him because of the reverence he had for the holy man, the Magistros stood up in anger and cursed him and all those in his household, and everything that he possessed, from horse and cattle all the way to bird and dog and all the rest. Although Gregory was seized by fear and utterly unable to answer, he was permitted to sit down because he was the protospatharios. Then, the Magistros said to him, “Go, wretch, with your similarly malicious companions, and make images of holy Nilus. Do not stop reverencing him and giving him thanks, for by the head of the holy Emperor, was it not for him you would not be alive.”

Thus, having prudently settled and rectified the affair, the one truly worthy of the blessedness of peace-makers<sup>138</sup> withdrew to the monastery, sending up prayers to God and attributing the outcome to His grace. But the beholder of heaven and genuine son of solitude sorely endured and was much oppressed by the company of the workers of iniquity<sup>139</sup> and by the sight of the world’s vanity and empty clamour. Nevertheless, he would come to the aid of the multitude and intermingle with rulers, suffering many terrible things and putting himself in danger in order to support and actively protect both those being treated unjustly and even those suffering justly.

[63] How often did he endure distress while journeying on foot to vindicate a soul mistreated by men who do not fear the Lord! How often did he bear the winter rain falling on his head, the bitterness of the air numbing his hands and feet, and the cold oppressing his entire body because he was dressed in a single

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<sup>138</sup> Matthew 5:9

<sup>139</sup> Psalm 93:4

## Chapter 11

*Nilus at Montecassino. He elucidates the Scriptures.*

[73] When the holy Father went to visit that renowned monastery, the entire multitude of monks came down to the base of the mountain to meet him. Dressed in sacred robes as if it were a feast day and carrying candles and thuribles in their hands, the priests and deacons led the blessed man to the monastery with much reverence, imagining that they were hearing and seeing none other than the great Anthony having come to them from Alexandria, or their lawmaker and teacher, the great Benedict, risen from the dead. Indeed, they judged rightly, and their imagination did not deceive them. All those who were oppressed by sufferings of either body or soul were cured, and all received from him what was fitting: those inclined to study received teachings, and those to action, guidance; sinners were corrected and the virtuous encouraged; the healthy were taught continence, while the sick were healed. In short, the holy man acted in their midst just like the manna in the desert, which changed to suit each Israelite's temperament and appetite,<sup>169</sup> such that no one in their tribes fell ill. Thus, he cured them by means of his God-sent presence and filled them with spiritual mirth.

Being greatly pleased with the monks' discipline and well-structured rule and admiring their laws as superior to our own, Nilus was escorted by the abbot and the foremost brothers to the monastery where he himself would settle with his children. This was the monastery of Saint Michael the Archangel, called

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<sup>169</sup> Wisdom 16:21

Valleluce.<sup>170</sup> Then, the abbot and the brothers entreated him to return to the main monastery with all of his own brothers and to chant the divine office in their church in Greek, so that *God may be all in all*,<sup>171</sup> which even the prophet predicted, saying: *The lion and the ox shall feed together, and their young ones shall rest together.*<sup>172</sup>

[74] At first, holy Nilus declined out of humility, saying, “*How shall we sing the song of the Lord in a strange land*,<sup>173</sup> who today are lowly in the entire world because of our sins?” Nevertheless, he finally agreed to do it so the brothers might find mutual consolation in faith and that the great name of Christ might be glorified. He therefore composed hymns to our holy Father Benedict from the fruit of his own lips, which covered all of the miracles written in the saint’s Life. Then, taking all of his brothers (who were more than sixty in number), he went up to the monastery of Cassino and spent the whole night chanting most harmoniously. For the brothers he had with him were intelligent and quite skilled in reading and psalm-singing, he himself having instructed them in both disciplines.

After the completion of the divine office, all the monks came to him with the permission of their abbot (for even in this regard they maintained strict discipline). Amazed at the radiance of the spirit emanating from his face, they were eager to listen to the words from his mouth. Therefore, they presented consecutive

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<sup>170</sup> By the time of Nilus’ arrival, the abbey of Montecassino had several dependencies in the surrounding region, including Valleluce (Kalhous, p. 290; See also Herbert Bloch, *Monte Cassino in the Middle Ages*, an extensive three-volume study of the abbey and its dependencies).

<sup>171</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:28

<sup>172</sup> Isaiah 65:25; 11:7

<sup>173</sup> Psalm 136:4

problems to him, saying, "Tell us, holy Father, what is the work of a monk, and how are we to find mercy?" The blessed one opened his mouth and said in the Roman tongue, "A monk is an angel. His work is mercy, peace, and sacrifice of praise. For just as the holy angels continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God, are charitably united in peace amongst themselves, and mercifully assist men as if they were their younger brothers, so too is it necessary for the true monk to show mercy to younger and strange brothers, to love his equals in peace, to refuse to envy the successes of others, and to have genuine faith and hope in God and his spiritual Father. He who has acquired these three things leads an angelic life on earth, while he who acquires their opposites, namely faithlessness, hate, and inhumanity, becomes the dwelling place of every evil and is explicitly revealed to be a demon. [75] After one becomes a monk, he does not continue being a man, but must become one of two things: either an angel or a demon. But in respect to you, brothers, I believe the best of things and those leading to salvation."

When the holy man had finished discussing these and other subjects which are beyond the limits of this book, the brothers' hearts were pierced. One of them answered and said, "Why does David say, *With the holy, thou wilt be holy, and with the elect thou wilt be elect: and with the perverse thou wilt be perverted?*"<sup>174</sup> The great one said to him, "The prophet said this about God, not man, for what follows befits God, not man: *For Thou wilt save the humble but wilt bring down the eyes of the proud.*"<sup>175</sup> David indeed heard God say, *I am the living Lord; if you walk rightly with*

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<sup>174</sup> Psalm 17:26-27

<sup>175</sup> Psalm 17:28