

FROM THE SKETE RULE OF ST. NILUS OF SORA

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 defeat 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 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.