

Selected Writings of Saint Rafael Arnáiz Barón:  
A Translation

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Fig. i<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Text: “Ex libris Arnáiz.” Bookplate designed by St. Rafael Arnáiz Barón. Image source: Antonio Cobos Soto, *La «pintura mensaje» del Hermano Rafael* (Burgos: Monte Carmelo y Monasterio Cisterciense de San Isidro de Dueñas, 1989), 112.

### **Abstract**

This dissertation presents a portion of the first complete English translation of the writings of Saint Rafael Arnáiz Barón, the first canonized saint of the Trappist order.

Prepared in collaboration with Cistercian Publications and Our Lady of the Angels Monastery in Crozet, Virginia, the translation seeks to facilitate further study of Saint Rafael's life and writings, which speak to the spiritual dimensions of war, disease, isolation, and grief. Translated with an eye toward the Trappist vows of obedience, stability, and conversion, this edition was prepared for a devotional audience, but also refers the reader to resources for further academic study throughout.

## Acknowledgments

I am deeply grateful to Sr. María Gonzalo, OCSO, for introducing me (and so many others!) to St. Rafael, and for entrusting this translation to me. She has been a generous, tireless collaborator, and this project would not have happened without her intellectual rigor and personal patience. Both of us owe a debt in turn to Dr. Jane Mooney, whose graciousness, devotion, and expertise laid the foundation for this translation; to Dr. Louis Carnendran, whose funding made this work possible; to Dr. Marsha Dutton, our wonderful editor at Cistercian Publications; and to the community at San Isidro de Dueñas, for their support of this project and their permission to reprint St. Rafael's art.

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Finally I thank Divine Providence, from whom this project came and whom I hope it serves, for orchestrating its beginnings and bringing it to completion, and for his magnanimity in never minding being thanked last.

Catherine Addington

Charlottesville, Virginia

April 23, 2021 • Diada de Sant Jordi

## Abbreviations

- OC        *Obras completas*
- Arnáiz Barón, Rafael. *Hermano San Rafael: Obras completas*. Edited by Alberico Feliz Carbajal, OSCO, sixth edition. Burgos: Monte Carmelo, 2011.
- RB        *Rule of Saint Benedict*
- Benedict, Saint. *The Rule of Saint Benedict in English*. Edited by Timothy Fry, RB 1980 Edition. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2019.
- Summ     *Summarium*
- Dante, Giulio. *Summarium*. In *Palentina Canonizationis servi Dei Raphaélis Arnáiz Barón, Ordinis Cisterciensium Reformatorum Oblati, Positio super virtutibus* by Congregatio pro Causis Sanctorum, Rome: Tip. Guerra, 1987, pp. 1–265.
- VE        *Vida y escritos*
- Arnáiz Barón, Rafael. *Vida y escritos de Fray María Rafael Arnáiz Barón: monje trapense*. Edited by Mercedes Barón y Torres. Madrid: P.S. Editorial, 1974.

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## Introduction

Each saint is a mission, planned by the Father to reflect and embody, at a specific moment in history, a certain aspect of the Gospel. [. . .] Every saint is a message which the Holy Spirit takes from the riches of Jesus Christ and gives to his people. To recognize the word that the Lord wishes to speak to us through one of his saints, we do not need to get caught up in details, for there we might also encounter mistakes and failures. Not everything a saint says is completely faithful to the Gospel; not everything he or she does is authentic or perfect. What we need to contemplate is the totality of their life, their entire journey of growth in holiness, the reflection of Jesus Christ that emerges when we grasp their overall meaning as a person.<sup>2</sup>

What is the message spoken by the life and works of Saint Rafael Arnáiz Barón? To a certain extent, this dissertation and the book publication that builds from it seek more to help us ask this question than to answer it. Even so, by translating the writings of a monk whose life was so devastatingly interrupted and redefined by disease, who struggled with depression from isolation and trauma without the vocabulary to describe it, and whose final years were defined by the search for meaning in the midst of civil war, I do aim to make Rafael speak to “a specific moment in history.” These writings were translated from spring 2020 to spring 2021, a time of pandemic and political violence, in isolated contemplative conditions that might be called monastic. This year, when

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<sup>2</sup> Francis, Pope. *Gaudete et Exsultate: Apostolic Exhortation on the Call to Holiness in Today's World*. Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 19 Mar. 2018.

everything was called “unprecedented,” I read Rafael and knew it was not. His writings pursue classic questions at the heart of Christianity—the spiritual meaning of the Cross, the sanctifying power of unrelenting suffering, the nature of a God who would mandate such a thing—but with the unexpected joy, humor, and insight of a young man in love. In these pages, we will witness Rafael coming to love first his monastic calling and then his illness and isolation as God’s ways of drawing him into greater intimacy with the divine. Was he just coping? Was he delirious? Was he naive? Or was he more desperate than anyone to face the truth of things?

Prepared in collaboration with Cistercian Publications and Our Lady of the Angels Monastery in Crozet, Virginia, this dissertation presents an English translation of a selection of Rafael’s writings. While previous efforts have been made to translate selections of his work, most notably by Sr. Juanita Colon, OCSO, and Sr. Charles Longuemare, OCSO, in a six-part series for *Cistercian Studies Quarterly*,<sup>3</sup> the book-length version of this project will be the first complete English-language edition of his writings. By bringing these writings into English, I hope to make possible the exploration of the topics I raise above and more. In particular, this project invites critical engagement from the fields of disability studies, war and peace studies, and theology, among others; creative interventions in art, literature, and digital humanities; and a devotional encounter with the expanding canon of saints who lived with chronic physical and mental illnesses.

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<sup>3</sup> Juanita Colon, OCSO and Charles Longuemire, OCSO. “Life and Writings of Brother M. Rafael Baron.” *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* 33.1 (1998): 61–79; 34.1 (1999): 28–51; 35.1 (2000): 77–91; 36.1 (2001): 41–84; 37.1 (2002): 71–82; and 38.1 (2003): 35–83.

Before we begin our contemplation, however, let us get to know the author and settle into the world he lived in.

### **Biography**

Rafael Arnáiz Barón was born in Burgos on April 9, 1911, the eldest child of the forest engineer Rafael Arnáiz Sánchez de la Campa and the newspaper columnist Mercedes Barón Torres. The couple went on to have three more children, Luis Fernando (b. 1913), Leopoldo (b. 1914), and Mercedes, affectionately called “Merceditas” (b. 1917). Like their parents, all four children were devout Catholics, and observed daily devotions of prayer both individually and as a family. In 1922, when Rafael was 11 years old, the Arnáiz Barón family moved from Burgos to Oviedo, following his father’s work.

In many ways, Rafael’s family situation reflected the political tensions of the time, tensions that would eventually spill into the civil war that defined the last years of his life. When Rafael was born in 1911, Spain was ruled by the fragile parliamentary monarchy of Alfonso XIII, a regime that his family enthusiastically supported. Rafael’s father descended from a rich landholding family, while his mother was born into a military family in the Philippines in 1898, the year that Spain lost its last colonies to the United States.<sup>4</sup> This combination of monarchist beliefs, family wealth, nostalgia for an imperial past, and Catholic devotion represented a significant portion of the right-wing sentiment on one side of Spain’s increasing polarization in this era, while socialist, communist, anarchist, and anticlerical movements emerged on the left in response to

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<sup>4</sup> Antonio Martín Fernández-Gallardo, *San Rafael Arnáiz Barón: vida y mensaje del Hermano Rafael* (Madrid: Edibesa, 2009), 27.

widespread economic and institutional crises. While Rafael does not often address politics directly in his writings until the war, his social position certainly informed his sense of responsibility and filial piety as an eldest son.

Eager to please his father the engineer, but also utterly gifted as an artist and architect-in-training, Rafael dedicated much of his youth to cultivating his talents in art and mathematics. From drawing to painting to stained-glass design, Rafael delighted in using his artistic capabilities to give glory to God in religious projects, but they also brought out a certain ambition in him. In a letter to his father about a drawing exam, Rafael bragged, “I wouldn’t have traded my drawing for that of any of the other seventy students who were in the class ... There were some people who should have gotten a Y or a Z instead of an F.”<sup>5</sup> Moments like these make his spiritual transformation all the more stark, as Rafael’s thoughtfulness and humility increased both with his age and with the deepening of certain influential relationships.

The most significant of these was Rafael’s intense spiritual friendship with his aunt and uncle, María Osorio and Leopoldo “Polín” Barón. After finishing his secondary education in 1929, Rafael and his sister Merceditas took a trip to Pedrosillo, María and Leopoldo’s estate in Ávila.<sup>6</sup> There, the couple began to encourage their nephew to consider a religious vocation. In the summer of 1930, as Rafael prepared to move to Madrid to continue his studies at the Higher Technical School of Architecture, Leopoldo

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<sup>5</sup> Letter 2.

<sup>6</sup> Gonzalo María Fernández, *God Alone: A Spiritual Biography of Blessed Rafael Arndíz Barón*, trans. Hugh McCaffery (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2008), 8.

commissioned him to paint the cover for a book he had recently translated: the biography of Gabriel Mossier, a French soldier turned Trappist monk.<sup>7</sup> Over the course of the project, Rafael found himself captivated by the way of life Mossier described. On September 30, 1930,<sup>8</sup> just a few weeks after starting school, he visited the Trappist Monastery of San Isidro de Dueñas (“La Trapa”)<sup>9</sup> in Venta de Baños, Palencia, to see it for himself. It was his first visit to the monastery that would become his home, and his romantic impressions of monastic austerity contrasted intensely with what he perceived to be his own worldliness:

I have been feeling deeply ashamed of myself. Trappist monks wear coarse black wool, rough and stiff. They put it on when they profess and they are shrouded in it when they die . . . In my room, I see my silk neckties hanging up . . . a serious

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<sup>7</sup> Juan Antonio Martínez Camino, *Mi Rafael: el Beato Rafael Arnáiz, según el Padre Teófilo Sandoval, su confesor, intérprete y editor* (Bilbao: Desclée de Brouwer, 2003), 54. For the book on Gabriel Mossier, see Dom Antoine de Bourg, *Del campo de batalla a la trapa: El hermano Gabriel* (Madrid: Librería Religiosa Hernández, 1931).

<sup>8</sup> Gonzalo María Fernández, *God Alone: A Spiritual Biography of Blessed Rafael Arnáiz Barón*, trans. Hugh McCaffery (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2009), 9.

<sup>9</sup> The monastery’s nickname, “La Trapa,” originates from the Monastery of La Trappe in France, where the Trappist reform originated. The Trappists are a reform of the Cistercian order, which in turn is a reform of the Benedictine monastic tradition; for further explanation, see the Glossary of Common Terms in Appendix II.

cause for reflection, and at the same time a trifle, one that makes me blush, realizing that one can hide such foolish vanity in a ridiculous piece of cloth.<sup>10</sup>

While Rafael continued with his training as an architect, he deepened his daily commitment to prayer and felt drawn to make a longer stay at La Trapa. He made a retreat there from July 17–26, 1932. In addition to his monastic discernment, Rafael’s studies were further interrupted by his obligatory military service in the Spanish Army Corps of Engineers from January 25–July 26, 1933. Ultimately, despite his great trepidation at the sadness his departure would cause his family, Rafael requested entrance into La Trapa on November 33, 1933. Writing to the abbot, Dom Félix Alonso García, for his permission, he reflected, “I am not motivated to change my life in this way because of sadness or suffering or disappointment or disillusionment with the world . . . I have all that it can give me.”<sup>11</sup>

Rafael was received into the community at La Trapa on January 16, 1934 as a postulant, meaning someone who is seeking admission into a religious order. After a month of this probationary period, he was officially received into the community as a novice on February 18, 1934. Upon reception into the novitiate, he was clothed with the habit and received a religious name: Brother María Rafael.

Regardless of one’s status in the monastery, life at La Trapa was governed by the same basic practices laid down by the Rule of Saint Benedict in the year 516: prayer and work, in that order. A monk’s primary task is worshiping God through the liturgy, which

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<sup>10</sup> Manuscript 12, *Impressions of La Trapa*.

<sup>11</sup> Letter 13. The title “Dom” is used to address abbots in the Benedictine tradition.

has two main parts: the Mass and the Liturgy of the Hours, also known as the Divine Office, which uses the Book of Psalms to structure the day's prayer. Monks were instructed to leave behind every other task at the ring of the prayer bell, for, as the Rule states, "nothing is to be preferred to the Work of God."<sup>12</sup> As for the rest of the day's work, there was plenty of manual labor to be done at La Trapa. The monks lived off the land they farmed themselves, as well as the income from the chocolate factory they ran. Domestic tasks such as cooking, cleaning, and laundry also required a great deal of labor, since the community had hundreds of members during this time.

In addition to prayer and work, Rafael's life at La Trapa was defined by the observance of silence. Members of the community were not to speak outside of participating in the Liturgy, although they could talk with their superiors under special circumstances and used Cistercian sign language for minimal exchanges during the day. This silence extended to communication with the outside world, as the monks received news only through the discretion of their superiors and were required to ask permission to write letters. Even as Rafael's ebullient personality struggled to adjust to such silence and austerity, he adored life at the La Trapa, and his letters home brimmed over with joy.

This monastic honeymoon phase came to an abrupt halt on May 26, 1934, when Rafael was forced to leave the monastery due to grave illness from diabetes. He moved back in with his parents in Oviedo to seek medical treatment for his condition, which at

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<sup>12</sup> RB 43.3.



the time, had just begun to be treatable.<sup>13</sup> He was hopeful that the monastery's infirmary could handle his daily insulin injections, and so he looked forward to a quick return, keeping up his correspondence with his monastic superiors all through the summer of 1934. However, this plan to return was interrupted, too, this time by events more political than personal.

On October 5, Rafael and his family suddenly found themselves surrounded by the violence of the Revolution of 1934. It began with an uprising led by miners' unions in Asturias, the region where they lived, but the true beginnings of the conflict stretched back years. After the deposition of the monarchy in 1931 and the subsequent establishment of the Second Spanish Republic, Spain had come to be governed under a parliamentary system with a president and prime minister. However, the same political divisions that had led to the tension between the monarchy and the republic continued, bubbling over most prominently in the 1933 elections. Despite an electoral victory by the

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<sup>13</sup> The use of insulin as a treatment for diabetes was discovered in 1921 and implemented in 1923, “transform[ing] an acute, rapidly fatal illness into a chronic disease with serious long-term complications” (Robert B. Tattersall, “The History of Diabetes Mellitus,” in *Textbook of Diabetes* [John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 2010], 10). Because the only type of insulin treatment available at the time was short-acting, treatment required multiple daily injections and constant monitoring to avoid hypoglycemia (ibid., 14). Long-acting insulin treatment was invented in 1936, the same year that the distinction between type 1 diabetes (which responds only to insulin treatment) and type 2 diabetes (which also responds to dietary management) was discovered. Rafael had the former type.

right-wing coalition, President Niceto Alcalá-Zamora refused to appoint a member of the winning party as Prime Minister and waited over a year before appointing any of its members to cabinet positions.<sup>14</sup> The socialist uprising in October 1934 was launched nominally in response to those appointments, although the Asturian miners' strike also proceeded from historically broad industrial discontent.<sup>15</sup> As a sign of the deep roots of the conflict, the uprising went far beyond issues in the mines. Participants waged great violence against clergy and religious institutions, murdering priests and religious and destroying churches and convents in Oviedo and beyond.<sup>16</sup>

After the violence ceased in Oviedo, where Rafael was staying with his parents, he went to the Burgos residence of his aunt and uncle, Pepita Conde Merino and Álvaro Barón Torres.<sup>17</sup> His writings reflected the difficult position of Spanish Catholics during this period. With indifference toward poverty on the right, and anticlerical violence on the left, Rafael found himself disgusted by the situation in Asturias and in Spain more broadly:

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<sup>14</sup> Paul Preston, *The Spanish Civil War: Reaction, Revolution, and Revenge*, Revised and Expanded Edition (New York: W.W. Norton, 2007), 66–77.

<sup>15</sup> Helen Graham, *The Spanish Civil War: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 15.

<sup>16</sup> For example, the Dominican chapel where Rafael attended daily Adoration was burned, and six seminarians were killed (OC 366). They were beatified in 2019 as Blessed Ángel Cuartas Cristóbal and companions.

<sup>17</sup> OC 363.

If the idea of God is taken from the poor, they have nothing else left; their desperation is justifiable, their hatred for the rich is natural, their desire for revolution and anarchy is logical. And if the idea of God is a nuisance to the rich, and they do not heed the precepts of the Gospel and the teachings of Jesus . . . then they shouldn't complain. If their selfishness hinders them from drawing near to the poor, they should not be surprised when the latter plan to take what they have by force.<sup>18</sup>

After witnessing the violence of the uprising, Rafael fell into what he referred to as a “serious nervous breakdown”<sup>19</sup> and stopped communicating with the monastery altogether. He finally replied to one of his novice master's letters in February 1935, revealing his increasing desolation: “I find myself so far from my monastery, which I long for more ardently with each passing day. For me, that is my life, and I see that time is passing, but I don't see what God wants from me . . . ”<sup>20</sup>

Over the course of the year, as his diabetes proved a chronic challenge, Rafael revisited his discernment of his monastic vocation. He remained certain that God was calling him to La Trapa, but began to wonder if it might be in a different capacity—as an oblate, or non-vowed member, rather than a monk.<sup>21</sup> Oblates, unlike monks, do not take

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<sup>18</sup> Manuscript 51.

<sup>19</sup> Letter 61.

<sup>20</sup> Letter 61.

<sup>21</sup> “The oblate is a member of the community where he is received, without being canonically a member of the Order. [. . .] The oblature has the character of a promise of

vows and are able to observe modified diets, penances, and schedules—a status more conducive to Rafael’s health. In October 1935, he visited his spiritual advisor, Sor Pilar García, the abbess of the Poor Clares at Ávila, to ask her advice.<sup>22</sup> Soon after, while staying with his aunt and uncle, he wrote to the abbot to ask for re-admission in this new role. In this letter, Rafael shared his understanding of what God was seeking to accomplish through his medical and vocational struggles:

My vocation was from God, and is of God, but it needed to be purified, its rough edges needed smoothing. I gave myself to the Lord generously, but I still wasn’t giving Him *everything*; I gave Him my body, my soul, my career, my family . . . but I still held on to one thing: my dreams and desires, my hopes of being a Trappist and making my vows and singing the Mass. That kept me going at La

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mutual fidelity on the part of the oblate and on the part of the community, and it does not of itself imply any vow. However, the oblate leads the monastic life according to the spirit of the vows of obedience, conversion of manners and stability. This mutual agreement is revocable on either side, but only for serious reasons” (*Constitutions and Statutes of the Monks and Nuns of the Cistercian Order of the Strict Observance and Other Legislative Documents* [Rome: Cistercian Order of the Strict Observance, 1990], 39).

<sup>22</sup> Letter 63. Sor Pilar was also a spiritual advisor to Rafael’s uncle Leopoldo, who introduced them.

Trapa, but God wants more, He always wants more. I needed to be transformed. He wanted His love alone to be enough for me.<sup>23</sup>

After receiving permission to re-enter as an oblate, Rafael returned to his parents' home in Oviedo, where remained until his return to La Trapa.

On January 11, 1936, Rafael re-entered the monastery as an oblate. He was asked by his superiors to begin studying for priestly ordination,<sup>24</sup> as well as contribute his drawing and painting skills to various artistic projects around the monastery.<sup>25</sup> Like the other monks and oblates, Rafael was not privy to the daily details of the news as the political situation intensified and the Spanish Civil War approached in the summer of 1936. "Here, we're just doing what we always do," he wrote to his aunt, "praying for Spain, but knowing nothing about it. If something happens, our superiors will tell us."<sup>26</sup> Meanwhile, Rafael focused his efforts on a writing project, an illustrated notebook he gave the title *Meditations of a Trappist*. Nevertheless, the conflict did reach the monastery that summer, and it changed the course of Rafael's life once more.

The Spanish Civil War officially began July 17, 1936, with a military uprising led by General Francisco Franco against the government of the Second Spanish Republic. Broadly speaking, the war was a conflict between the right-wing Nationalists and the left-wing Republicans; on a practical level, each side consisted of a complex ideological

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<sup>23</sup> Letter 64.

<sup>24</sup> Letter 103.

<sup>25</sup> Letter 102.

<sup>26</sup> Letter 105.

alliance that varied by region.<sup>27</sup> In Rafael's case, both he and his family were entirely concerned with the fate of the Church, especially after having witnessed the anticlerical violence in Oviedo during the Revolution of 1934.<sup>28</sup> They all supported the Nationalist coup, believing it to be the only alternative to a violently anticlerical and totalitarian future—especially once Rafael's monastery was threatened repeatedly by local revolutionaries allied with the Republicans.<sup>29</sup> Even so, Rafael retained a certain distance from the ideological passions of the day, worrying about what would follow in their wake: “if victory does not make us better people . . . then it would be preferable not to be victorious.”<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> For an overview of the conflict's origins, politics, and course, see Paul Preston, *The Spanish Civil War: Reaction, Revolution, and Revenge*, Revised and Expanded Edition (New York: W. W. Norton, 2007) or Helen Graham, *The Spanish Civil War: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005). Franco declared victory for the Nationalists on April 1, 1939 and ruled as dictator of Spain until his death in 1975.

<sup>28</sup> See introduction to Section 5: A New Call.

<sup>29</sup> According to Rafael's confessor, Fr. Teófilo Sandoval, “On July 19, [1934,] two large vans of Republican fighters armed with pistols, carbines, and rifles surrounded the monastery, threatening the monks. A small group of soldiers came from Palencia to drive them away . . . [The Republicans] had planned to strip the monks naked and burn them alive in the Dueñas town square, along with the local Teresian Sisters and parish priest, Don Fulgencio, whom they had captured a few days prior” (testimony quoted in OC 637).

<sup>30</sup> *Meditations* 123.

On September 29, 1936, Rafael was conscripted into the army, along with the other oblates, novices, and monks of military age.<sup>31</sup> Forced to leave the monastery for a second time, Rafael reported for military service eagerly, believing God was unexpectedly calling him to a more literal martyrdom. Ultimately, though, he was found medically unfit to serve. Thus, when Rafael returned to La Trapa on December 6, 1936, he was in something of an identity crisis, humiliated to have been found “useless,” the only young man from the monastery to be rejected as a soldier.<sup>32</sup>

While the present selection ends with the *Meditations*, the book-length version of this project will explore the ramifications of that crisis, especially the transformation of Rafael’s understanding of his own “uselessness” as he moved back into the monastery’s

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<sup>31</sup> “Conscription had been introduced [. . .], giving the Nationalists an advantage of something in the region of two hundred thousand troops over the Republicans. [. . .] By December 1937, Franco had called up eleven years’ worth of conscripts, those from 1929 to 1939, consisting of 413,500 men” (Preston, *The Spanish Civil War*, 273). Rafael had completed his obligatory military service in 1933, placing him squarely within the range of young men eligible for conscription.

<sup>32</sup> In a letter to his mother, shortly after his rejection from the army, Rafael wrote, “my uselessness keeps me from taking up arms to serve my country” (Letter 134, October 18, 1936).

infirmary.<sup>33</sup> Moreover, it will trace the increasing contrast between the external chaos of Rafael's ongoing vocational troubles with the internal peace he cultivated.

On the outside, Rafael's journey remained in disarray. He was sent away from the monastery for a third time on February 7, 1937 for medical treatment, moving in with his family in Villasandino. He returned to La Trapa for the final time on December 15, 1937, and died there in a diabetic coma on April 26, 1938. On the inside, though, Rafael's letters and writings reveal a remarkable steadiness as he trudged to and from the monastery:

On the path that the Lord is leading me down, this path that only God and I know, I have stumbled many times; I have endured deep, bitter sorrows; I have had to make continual renunciations; I have experienced disappointments; and the Lord has frustrated even the hopes I'd thought holiest. May He be blessed.

Because, well, every part of that was necessary . . . My *solitude* was necessary. The renunciation of my will was necessary. My illness was, and is, necessary.

But why? Because, look: as the Lord has led me from place to place, leaving me without a fixed abode, showing me what I am, and detaching me from His creatures, sometimes gently, other times roughing me up . . . along this whole

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<sup>33</sup> After his return to the monastery, Rafael reflected, "Showing me the great void that is nothingness, which is everything outside of Him, [God] invites me to reflect and obliges me, in my uselessness, to seek His aid. He separates me from everything else in order to unite me more closely to Himself" (*My Notebook* 150).



path, which I see so clearly now, I've come to learn something, and my soul has changed . . . I don't know if this will make sense, but I've learned to love people as they are, and not as I wish they were. My soul—with or without a cross, whether good or bad, wherever it may be, wherever God places it, as God wishes it—has undergone a transformation . . . I can't explain it, I don't have the words . . . but I call it *serenity* . . .

It is a very great peace that allows you to both suffer and rejoice . . . It is knowing you are loved by God, despite our littleness and misery . . . It is the sweet, serene joy of truly abandoning yourself in His hands.<sup>34</sup>

It is fitting that Rafael's most eloquent articulation of his vocational journey should come in a letter to his uncle, Leopoldo Barón, who had been such an influence on him from the beginning. After his nephew's death, Leopoldo was the first to publish a book on Rafael's remarkable life and vocation, a slim biographical volume printed in 1944.<sup>35</sup> Three years later came the first edition of Rafael's writings, edited by his mother, Mercedes Barón.<sup>36</sup> Both Leopoldo and Mercedes were assisted by Fr. Teófilo Sandoval, OCSO, who had been Rafael's confessor in his final years and not only encouraged him

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<sup>34</sup> Letter 159 to Leopoldo Barón, March 18, 1937.

<sup>35</sup> Duque de Maqueda [Leopoldo Barón], *Un secreto de la Trapa: El hermano Rafael* (Madrid: Librería Religiosa, 1944).

<sup>36</sup> *Escritos y datos biográficos de Fray María Rafael Arnáiz Barón, monje trapense*, ed. Mercedes Barón (Oviedo: s.n., 1947). Later published as *Vida y escritos de Fray María Rafael Arnáiz Barón: monje trapense* (Madrid: P.S. Editorial, 1974).

to write during his lifetime but preserved and organized his writings after his death.

These first three editors of Rafael's writings—Leopoldo, Mercedes, and Fr. Teófilo—have profoundly shaped the reception and study of his work, being responsible not only for its availability but also its editorial structure, titling, and contextualization.<sup>37</sup> After supporting these family-led efforts to publish Rafael's writings, the monastery formally began the process for his beatification in 1960.

After a thorough examination of his life and writings by the Vatican's Congregation for the Causes of Saints, Rafael Arnáiz Barón was declared a Servant of God on January 15, 1983. He was then declared Venerable on September 7, 1989; beatified on September 17, 1992; and finally, canonized on October 11, 2009. He is the first Trappist to be recognized as a saint in the more than 350-year history of the order.

## **Methodology**

### ***Edition***

This dissertation presents the collected writings of Saint Rafael Arnáiz Barón from April 1921 to August 1936. While the starting point was dictated by the available archive—Rafael's earliest extant writing is a postcard to his father written in April 1921 as a ten-year-old—the editorial decision to select August 1936 as an endpoint was made primarily for pragmatic reasons under time constraints. As such, the book-length version

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<sup>37</sup> For more on the editors of Rafael's work, see Juan Antonio Martínez Camino, *Mi Rafael: el Beato Rafael Arnáiz, según el Padre Teófilo Sandoval, su confesor, intérprete y editor* (Bilbao: Desclée de Brouwer, 2003).

of this project will also cover the rest of Rafael's writings before his death in April 1938, presenting as complete a picture of his spiritual trajectory as possible.

Even so, this pragmatically-chosen endpoint also functions to mark the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War as a fundamental turning point not just in the life of the nation, but also in the life of this particular historical actor. Over the course of the writings presented here, a somewhat snobbish, highly opinionated art student becomes so increasingly consumed by the eternal that he is hardly disturbed by the prospect of leaving behind his dream life at the monastery for the misery of a war he barely knew anything about. While it would be too simplistic to characterize this journey as a mere shift from worldliness to detachment, from earthly aspirations to divine belonging, these writings do document a certain transformation in Rafael's desire. Rafael describes this change himself in one of the last letters included in this dissertation:

In the world, I did whatever I wanted [ . . . ] Now it's different, I can't do whatever I want . . . well honestly, I don't want anything, but you know what I mean. My renunciation is not yet as perfect as it ought to be, but my desire is to give myself over to Jesus in all things.<sup>38</sup>

More specifically, in the letters and writings included in this dissertation, we can observe Rafael slowly embrace the philosophy for which he would become known, encapsulated in his simple two-word motto: "*sólo Dios*," "God alone." It is not that Rafael shed his affection for his family and friends, his affinity for religion and art, or any of the other earthly things that dominated his youthful writings as a student. These

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<sup>38</sup> Letter 105.

writings trace not a quasi-stoic reduction in desire, but a growth in desire. For Rafael, loving God meant loving “God alone,” shedding all other attachments as an essential part of the process. He did not pursue renunciation for its own sake, but as part of a broader spiritual journey toward what he saw as the purpose of life itself: to love and serve God. For Rafael, the renunciation inherent in the word “alone” came second; loving God came first.

Within these starting and ending points, the selection of Rafael’s writings presented here is based on the bibliographical work of Fr. Alberico Feliz Carbajal, OCSO, the primary editor of his complete works.<sup>39</sup> Feliz’s work to create the definitive scholarly edition of Rafael’s writings, omitting not a single scrap of paper the saint scribbled on, replete as it is with footnotes giving explanatory context and lengthy interviews with friends and family, cannot be improved upon. This project, being a translation, does not intend to supplant Feliz’s definitive scholarly edition, but rather to present as complete a picture as possible of Rafael’s life to an English-speaking audience for devotional and spiritual purposes. With the assumption that any serious scholar of Rafael’s work will consult the original, and with that audience already being so well served by Feliz’s edition, the present edition is free to select only the most compelling of Rafael’s writings for translation.

That said, the present edition omits very few of Rafael’s writings, because almost all of his work, from contemplative letters to hastily dashed-off notes, contained ideas,

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<sup>39</sup> Saint Rafael Arnáiz Barón, *Hermano San Rafael: Obras completas*, edited by Fr. Alberico Feliz Carbajal, OCSO, sixth edition (Burgos: Edición Monte Carmelo, 2011).

beliefs, and reflections relevant to his spiritual journey. Using that lens, the only writings excluded from this edition are various letters from Rafael's youth, from which a representative sample has instead been taken;<sup>40</sup> a series of logistical letters to his parents and drawing tutor;<sup>41</sup> three postcards;<sup>42</sup> a stray page from Rafael's student agenda;<sup>43</sup> and assorted undated notes and scraps, most of which are quotes from other authors that he copied into his notebooks.<sup>44</sup> Regarding this last category, the footnotes to this edition, as well as Rafael's plentiful textual references to the spiritual writers who had the greatest influence on him, are sufficiently informative as to the saint's personal canon that no major insight is lost by omitting these extra materials.

This edition divides its comprehensive selections from Rafael's writings into six sections, structured around major changes in his life: his juvenilia, running from his childhood through his college years (1921–1933); his monastic discernment, ending with his first entrance into La Trapa (1930–1934); his postulancy and novitiate (January–April 1934); his first exit from the monastery due to illness (June 1934–October 1935); his re-entrance as an oblate (October 1935–January 1936); and his writings as an oblate, through the beginning of the Spanish Civil War (January–August 1936).

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<sup>40</sup> In *Feliz*, these missing entries are numbered #2, 3, 5, 10–12, and 14.

<sup>41</sup> In *Feliz*, these are #17, 21–22, 26, 29–31, 33, 36, and 60.

<sup>42</sup> In *Feliz*, #24, 25, and 71.

<sup>43</sup> In *Feliz*, #19.

<sup>44</sup> In *Feliz*, #233–246.

As is evident from the sequence of events, these selections are presented more or less in chronological order, with two significant exceptions. The first reflects that Rafael's college years overlapped with his monastic discernment, both spanning from 1930 to 1933. While there is a certain revelatory quality to the overlap, as Rafael shifts rapidly between lighthearted university anecdotes and serious moral reflection, the texts have been thematically separated in order to allow the reader to more easily follow two somewhat technical sequences of events. First, the financial issues in Rafael's letters to his parents are easier to comprehend when read together, allowing the reader to fill in the blanks on his father's end (Letters 7–9). Second, Rafael's process of visiting, applying to, and ultimately entering the monastery is easier to follow when presented in that order, especially since his correspondents shift: while he had not yet confided in his parents, he did share his vocational decision-making with his aunt, uncle, and grandmother. Thus, reading their correspondence separately from that involving his parents reflects Rafael's own decision to keep those relationships separate during this period.

The second exception to chronological order is the separation of Rafael's correspondence as an oblate from his manuscript *Meditations of a Trappist*. While he wrote letters in between his work on the manuscript, this separation seeks to respect the structure that he intended for the *Meditations* as a coherent literary work.

Overall, however, chronological order is respected, allowing the reader to jump between genres with Rafael as he writes. The majority of his writings are epistolary, including letters, postcards, and dedications written to various acquaintances in books or on the backs of holy cards. While letters and postcards are lumped together as "Letters" in the table of contents and footnotes, the "Dedications" are identified separately as such;

the relationship they bear to the text or image upon which they are inscribed marks them out as a distinct genre. Rafael's writings also contain a third category, identified as "Manuscripts" here,<sup>45</sup> that span a number of handwritten documents without direct audiences. Sometimes these manuscripts clearly have a diary function, even when Rafael plays at addressing an imaginary reader, as in his *Impressions of La Trapa* (Manuscript 7). On other occasions, though, he clearly conceived of his notebooks as coherent literary works with a possible future audience, as with his illustrated manuscript *Meditations of a Trappist* (Manuscripts 108–130).

This diverse range of genres, textual and visual, reflects the variety of roles that writing and art played in Rafael's own life. In his own reflections, it becomes evident that his relationship to writing was slightly different outside the monastery and within it. Between stints in the monastery, Rafael sees writing—especially his spiritual correspondence with his aunt, María Osorio—as a means to prayer. "It's almost meditative for me," he writes her, "because talking about God and His works among His creatures is the only thing in this life that holds any interest for me."<sup>46</sup> He came to see writing as not just an act of talking about God to others, but ultimately talking to God himself:

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<sup>45</sup> Here I employ the straightforward definition of *manuscript* as an unpublished handwritten document, since Rafael did not publish any of his writings during his lifetime.

<sup>46</sup> Letter 75.

When I sit down to write you, I collect myself, I think a lot about Jesus, and I want to tell you so many things, but I can't. He absorbs me. I start out talking about Him, and I end up talking to Him . . . I start wanting to send you everything, and since everything is quite a lot, I don't know what happens to me, and so sometimes, I write things I didn't plan to . . . and what I did plan to write, I cannot.<sup>47</sup>

His relationship to art also developed from an academic discipline and contemplative aesthetic experience to a framework for understanding his own spiritual journey. Revisiting the sensory beauty of his first visit to La Trapa, Rafael described his entrance into the community as a shift in perspective. Speaking in the third person, he wrote:

He saw art in that scene at the abbey years ago, an occasion for delight . . . Everything played a part in making an impression on him ... Now, he is no longer a spectator, but an integral part of the scene that he had admired those years ago... He no longer sings the praises of art made by creatures, but by God. He is no longer all that moved by the colors of the field, except insofar as he sees their Creator in them.<sup>48</sup>

Of course, Rafael never conceived of writing and art as a strict binary. His own creative expression was fluidly both textual and visual, as his turn toward the genre of illustrated manuscript in his later years demonstrates. While his letters largely confined

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<sup>47</sup> Letter 85.

<sup>48</sup> Meditations 110



visuality to the occasional doodle, and his dedications relegated textuality to a merely sentimental flourish upon a central image, *Meditations of a Trappist* represents his first work that is fully both visual and textual. This pull toward hybridity accompanied a change in the role that his creative expression itself played. In the monastery, Rafael's creativity remained a prayerful activity for him, but it took on new meaning as his only outlet for personal expression while bound by the monastic practice of silence. Deprived of conversation, and with limited access to letter-writing, Rafael turned to his notebooks "to expel something of the excessive verbiage that the Lord has given me."<sup>49</sup> Even so, his choices as his own editor betray this self-deprecating framework.

Rafael's editorial activity is well documented in existing scholarship as well as in the notebooks he left behind, which leave a great deal of evidence that he revised and recopied several of his own writings. The manuscript *Impressions of La Trapa* is an excellent example of Rafael's editorial activity and how he integrated his writing into his broader artistic output. Not only did he revise and re-copy that manuscript,<sup>50</sup> he in fact copied it into a notebook that he designed as an anthology of spiritual writings for his own edification. He commissioned his mother to write a prologue for it,<sup>51</sup> and copied quotes from scripture and from saints' writings into the body of the work, which he

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<sup>49</sup> *Meditations* 108.

<sup>50</sup> Juan Antonio Martínez Camino, *Mi Rafael: el Beato Rafael Arnáiz, según el Padre Teófilo Sandoval, su confesor, intérprete y editor* (Bilbao: Desclée de Brouwer, 2003), 156.

<sup>51</sup> Martínez Camino, 158.

illustrated using both collage and drawing techniques. Copies of his own writings, including the *Impressions*, were reserved for the end of the notebook.<sup>52</sup> This structure speaks to Rafael's values as an artist: its hybrid visual and textual nature and its hierarchical ordering of God's word and saints' writings before his own musings are features of many of the other notebooks that he composed. He used these handmade anthologies for spiritual guidance, keeping them in his car so that he could use them for meditation when stopping at an overlook or going for a hike.<sup>53</sup> This time Rafael spent in contemplation amid nature as a grounding practice in the world would develop further in the monastery, where much of his day was spent in silence as he worked in the fields.

Toward the end of his life, though, Rafael began to have a sense that his writing was not intended exclusively for his own eyes. Some of his later notebooks (such as *Meditations of a Trappist*, included here, and *My Notebook*, included in the book-length version of this project) contain all the markings of print culture: epigraphs, subdivisions, illustrations subordinate to their corresponding texts, clear citations from other authors, and even occasional references to a future reader. This shift from collage-anthology to pre-book not only reflects the change in techniques available to him with the monastery's limited resources, but also suggests a shift in intended audience. Since Rafael made no moves to publish these more book-like manuscripts during his lifetime, he may have simply been experimenting with new styles; but he may also have been inspired to do so in prayer, entrusting their fate to God's providence.

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<sup>52</sup> Martínez Camino, 157.

<sup>53</sup> OC 984.

If Rafael saw his writing alternately as an outlet, a prayer, and a possible source for inspiration, this edition aims to honor the role that design played in his approach toward his own work. Using Juan Antonio Martínez Camino's bibliographic inventory of Rafael's writings as a reference point,<sup>54</sup> his illustrations have been restored to their place in the original text whenever possible, thereby correcting their misleading placements in Feliz's edition. When a manuscript forms part of a larger notebook project, footnotes are provided to illuminate that archival history. While this edition does use the titles added by Mercedes Barón and Fr. Teófilo Sandoval for the sake of consistency with the existing body of scholarship, they are always noted as such. Finally, the typography utilized in this edition replicates Rafael's own patterns of emphasis, using italics where he used a single underline; unusual spacing, double underlining, and multiple exclamation marks wherever he did; and his devout capitalization of pronouns when referring to God and Mary. This edition does, however, correct other inconsistencies in capitalization and errors in spelling and grammar (except where intentional, as in Letter 6). It abides by the style guide of Liturgical Press, of which the publisher of this translation, Cistercian Publications, is an imprint.

### *Translation*

At the outset of a translation of a monastic text, it is appropriate to ask what role translation plays in monastic culture itself. In addition to the formal translation work that would take place in scriptoria, monastic communities have historically been multilingual, with Latin used for liturgy and scholarship, the vernacular used for preaching, and sign

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<sup>54</sup> Martínez Camino, 242–252.

languages used for everyday communication while keeping silence. Even so, the role of translation in monastic culture goes beyond the incidental, and is in fact tied to the deepest spiritual values of the enterprise. Jean Leclercq famously emphasized the role of grammar, that is, the study of language and of Latin in particular, in Benedictine monasticism as a prerequisite for prayer:

How does grammar help one get to Heaven? By making possible the reading of the Scripture and the Fathers, it becomes a means for salvation and takes on sublime dignity. It is a gift of God, like His word itself, from which it cannot be separated since it furnishes the key to it.<sup>55</sup>

As Leclercq illustrates, this relationship between the study of language and the practice of prayer is particularly close in the Benedictine tradition, where the two principal forms of prayer (*lectio divina*, or sacred reading, and the liturgy) both involve meditation upon scripture. Thus, he writes, “*lectio divina*, this activity which begins with grammar, terminates in compunction, in desire of heaven.”<sup>56</sup> In such a context, the act of translation signifies worthiness for study, an endorsement of a text as helpful for spiritual development and ultimately the contemplation of God. As a translation of a saint’s writings intended for a monastic press, the present edition is certainly an heir to these values, and does ultimately aim to serve as an aid for contemplation.

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<sup>55</sup> Jean Leclercq, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God: A Study of Monastic Culture*, trans. Catharine Mizrahi (New York: Fordham University Press, 1961), 55.

<sup>56</sup> *ibid.*, 89.

At the same time, hagiographic translation for devotional purposes has its own theoretical tradition that needs reckoning with. In the context of the medieval monastery, Jerome's formulation for semantic translation as the governing norm for working with Scripture ("sense for sense, not word for word") remained dominant and essentially unquestioned; as I will elaborate below, this translation incorporates more modern and contemporary strategies as well. However, medieval translation projects were also governed by an intercessory logic in which translations were offered as acts of devotion to the saints, who could repay their translators with prayers and perhaps even time off in Purgatory. These "transcendent interpersonal logistics" created high spiritual stakes for hagiographic translators, who often opened their works with formulas of contrition for any introduced error.<sup>57</sup> In doing so, they recognized the power dynamic at play in religious translation, where the cultural authority of the original text informs the reader's reception of the translation. Kate Lowe, commenting upon the racist legacy of Jerome's introduction of the opposition between "black" and "beautiful" in his translation of the Song of Songs, reminds us that religious texts can serve to reify a translator's biases in that their errors assume the moral authority and cultural influence of the original.<sup>58</sup>

At their best, as Ian Johnson illustrates, medieval religious translators recognized this danger and foregrounded their interpretative role:

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<sup>57</sup> Ian Johnson, "Middle English Religious Translation," *A Companion to Medieval Translation*, ed. Jeanette Beer (Leeds: Arc Humanities Press, 2019), 46.

<sup>58</sup> Kate Lowe, "The Global Consequences of Mistranslation: The Adoption of the 'Black but ...' Formulation in Europe, 1440–1650" (*Religions* 3.3, Sept. 2012), 551.

What general conception, then, did medieval religious translators have of their craft? We need look no further than the great dictionary of the age, the *Catholicon* of Joannes Januensis: “*translatio est expositio sententie per aliam linguam*” (translation is the exposition of meaning/teaching through/by another language). Translation, then, was akin to commentary or exposition: not only were the linguistic unpacking and reinscription of the source part of the skill-set of the translator, so too was the interpretative elaboration of its contents.<sup>59</sup>

Heeding Lowe’s caution against implicit bias, I have taken this approach to my own translation, adopting an additional role as editor and commentator to make my own interpretations of the text explicit. To take a small but potent example, Rafael’s previous editors have generally used noble titles to refer to members of his family, but I break with that convention in my edition (here, his aunt and uncle are “María Osorio and Leopoldo Barón,” not “the Duke and Duchess of Maqueda”). While I retain the references to their titles in the actual translation in deference to the values of the original text, my own commentary does not. This is, in part, a mark of respect for Rafael’s own choices: he deliberately renounced his class status in order to pursue the monastic life. Moreover, that very class system was increasingly in shambles during this time period, and his biographers’ insistence on maintaining it is tied to a political program of restorationism and institutionalism. In setting these titles aside, I seek to break explicitly with such politics.

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<sup>59</sup> Ian Johnson, “Middle English Religious Translation,” 37.

In addition to acknowledging my own subjectivity, I have also made sure to represent Rafael's own biases, resisting the temptation to remove them from the text. When he refers to a female boarder as "*histérica*," I let him call her "hysterical"; when he makes fun of a cook's lower-class accent ("ná, ye un interesau"), I make sure he does so in English too: "Nah, yer jus' bein' selfish!"<sup>60</sup> Saints, like the rest of us, must be allowed to be humans—after all, their spiritual significance is located precisely in their ability to demonstrate the transformative power of divine love in the soul of a sinner. If they are not permitted to be sinners, their stories lose their narrative arc and cultural purpose. In foregrounding both my positionality as a translator, and Rafael's as a writer, I hope to have provided the reader with sufficient interpretative tools to read the translation critically.

Thus far, I have drawn largely on monastic and specifically hagiographic translation practices. However, this translation of a 20th century saint for a 21st century reader naturally draws on further centuries of development in translation theory and practice. Specifically, as a woman translator of a text written by a man who lived among men, I am particularly indebted to the feminist reinterpretation of the "faithful" translation as a mimicry of the linguistic masculine default. In other words, under the paradigm of "fidelity," a textual divergence where translation is "other" than original is not only a gendered betrayal figured as adulterous, but characterized as feminine in its

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<sup>60</sup> Letter 6.

visible difference.<sup>61</sup> From such a perspective, the worth of a translation “is always secondary to that of a male-authored original,”<sup>62</sup> rather than a new creation in its own right. With Emily Wilson, I reject the premise, echoing the obvious: “My translation is, like all translations, an entirely different text,”<sup>63</sup> insofar as Rafael wrote in Spanish and I write in English.

One of the most striking differences between the original text and my translation is the use of gendered language, a phenomenon for which Spanish and English have distinct grammatical resources. Where cultural norms have entrenched the pseudogeneric masculine in both languages (both “men” and “*los hombres*” have been used to mean “humanity”), I have elected to use gender-neutral language that reflects the deeper meaning of Rafael’s words. For example, when he writes that Jesus was crucified “*para todos los hombres*,” he does truly mean “for all humanity.”<sup>64</sup> In other instances, however, Rafael’s use of gendered language is a reflection of the circumstances of his vocation. Rafael was a man in a community comprised wholly of men; when he defaulted to masculine pronouns to describe his life at the monastery, he was not being exclusionary. Taking this into account, I have retained male pronouns when Rafael’s use of them is specific to his experience, such as when he refers to the impact that a stay at San Isidro

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<sup>61</sup> Susanne de Lotbinière-Harwood, *Re-belle et infidèle / The Body Bilingual* (Montréal: Éditions du Remue-ménage, 1991), 113.

<sup>62</sup> Emily Wilson, *The Odyssey* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2018), 86.

<sup>63</sup> *ibid.*, 86.

<sup>64</sup> Manuscript 12, *Impressions of La Trapa*.



might have upon a generic “Christian” (the masculine-marked “cristiano”) near the end of his eight-day retreat there:

But a Christian who has faith sees something more than that in La Trapa. He sees God clearly . . . He comes away edified in the faith, and if the Lord gives him the grace, he comes away knowing himself a little better . . . And there, alone with God and his conscience, he begins to change his way of thinking, his way of feeling, and most importantly, his way of acting in the world.<sup>65</sup>

Only male candidates would have been permitted this kind of intimate, lengthy visit to San Isidro. Rafael may write of “a Christian” in this passage, but he is really reflecting on what is happening in his own soul. By paying attention to gendered language in this way, perhaps more intentionally than Rafael himself would have, I strive to access the deeper meaning of his word choices rather than superficially transposing a masculine default that is ultimately a quirk of grammar.

At the same time, I want to resist the impulse to portray this translation as wholly a product of my own agency, however grateful I am to the feminist theorists like Lotbinière-Harwood who encourage women translators to do so. I join in Katherine M. Hedeem’s refusal to define creativity as an individual endeavor, characterized by originality and legitimized by inspiration, a paradigm she attributes to the Romantics.<sup>66</sup> With her, I instead celebrate this translation as a collective enterprise, a product vastly

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<sup>65</sup> Manuscript 12, *Impressions of La Trapa*.

<sup>66</sup> Katherine M. Hedeem, “Manifesto?” (*Asymptote Journal*, accessed June 25, 2020), note 5.

improved through line edits from my collaborator Sr. María Gonzalo, my editor Marsha Dutton, my advisor Allison Bigelow, and countless members of my Twitter community.

More specifically, I draw a connection between the communal nature of Rafael's own language, which was influenced so profoundly by Catholic religious orders as discursive communities, and the communal approach I have taken to this translation. When Rafael uses terminology particular to his Trappist community, I was grateful to be able to consult the Trappist community at Our Lady of the Angels Monastery in Crozet, Virginia, for appropriate English equivalents. Thanks to them, for instance, Rafael's need for exceptions ("*alivios*") to the community diet were translated using the term in English-language monastic usage, "indulgences," rather than the more literal "reprieves." Similarly, when Rafael used vocabulary drawn from his Jesuit schooling or his devotion to the Carmelite saints, I was able to draw on English-language writings about these spiritualities to ensure I used the terms these communities would use among themselves. To that end, Rafael speaks of "consolation," "desolation," and spiritual "dryness" when pulling from Ignatius of Loyola, and "recollection" when invoking the methods of Saint Teresa of Ávila.<sup>67</sup>

Even as I use these contemporary feminist and collective strategies, I am no less a hagiographic translator engaging in a practice structured by medieval religiosity. As I have sought to hold these traditions in tandem, rather than in tension, I have grounded my approach to this translation in the values that Rafael himself embraced as the governing principles of his life. Trappists make the three vows outlined in the Rule of Saint

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<sup>67</sup> See the Glossary of Common Terms in Appendix II.

Benedict: obedience, stability, and conversion. For translators, the value of obedience is obvious—we voluntarily bind ourselves to the style and message of our authors, even if we wish they had made different choices from time to time. It is these other two values, stability and conversion, that have guided me in this translation, and that I will explore briefly here as a methodological framework.

The vow of stability entails remaining in a specific monastery for the rest of one's life, as distinct from active religious orders, in which members move from community to community according to missionary mandates. This vow is rooted in the “threefold love” of one's religious vocation in general, the Trappist-Cistercian order in which that calling is lived, and one's monastery in particular.<sup>68</sup> It is unmistakable in Rafael, who always wrote of his vocation in terms of the abbey at San Isidro de Dueñas specifically. He saw himself as called not just to generically devout Catholicism nor to religious life in general, but to a Trappist life lived out in a monastery in a sparse Castilian river valley—circumstances that were not at all immaterial to him, but gifts of Divine Providence, the very stuff of his salvation.

I aim to honor that by translating Rafael in such a way that retains the markings of his circumstances. I hope to have preserved his voice in his time and his place, a Spanish man of the early twentieth century who spoke with the elegance of his education and the humor of his youth. The most distinctive aspect of Rafael's style is his humorous tone and familiar register, which I have attempted to capture in its lively modernity without

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<sup>68</sup> *La vida cisterciense en el monasterio de San Isidro de Dueñas* (Burgos: Tipografía de «El Monte Carmelo», 1923), 63.

introducing anachronisms.<sup>69</sup> For example, after teasing his teenage brother for his spelling mistakes, Rafael slyly reassured him:

Writing errors reveal the personality of the one who is writing, his temperament and way of being, and if we were all to write the same way, with our silent letters all in place, minding our p's and q's, then the epistolary genre would lose all its charm [. . .] For example, how much more expressive it is to say: "The cliffs wer steip, the see wuz choppy, and off inn the distants the son hided behind red cloudws." Such a paragraph is far more expressive than one like this: "The colorless, turbulent liquid with which the deep oleaginous expanse and its gleaming edges crashed—no, splashed—over the marbled granite rock of the shore's unfeeling crags resembled a shining sea of classical beauty." All right, I think by now I will have convinced you . . . and if not, suit yourself.<sup>70</sup>

Rafael was all the more lighthearted in the monastery, whether he was writing an apology ("whatever needs forgiving, there's always something"),<sup>71</sup> recounting his onion-peeling duties ("they aren't all exactly tears of compunction, as you can imagine"),<sup>72</sup> giving

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<sup>69</sup> In this regard, I have found the following resource invaluable: C.O. Sylvester Mawson, *Roget's International Thesaurus of English Words and Phrases* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1925).

<sup>70</sup> Letter 6.

<sup>71</sup> Letter 103.

<sup>72</sup> Letter 105.

thanks for the end of a fast (“the two fried eggs tasted like glory to me”)<sup>73</sup> or making self-deprecating jokes (“I’ll always be your nephew . . . You know, the slightly wacky one who used to twirl around by the radio, and then go visit nuns”).<sup>74</sup>

In addition to Rafael’s personality, I have also followed the spirit of stability by conserving markers of his Spanish identity. Following Friedrich Schleiermacher’s mandate to move the reader closer to the writer, rather than vice versa, I have allowed Rafael to keep his familiar units of measurement<sup>75</sup> and currency.<sup>76</sup> I have also left names in Spanish, as “Mamá” and “Papá” are hardly ambiguous, and “La Trapa” is no more foreign than “La Trappe.” Elsewhere, footnotes have been provided to explain the cultural context of irreplaceable Spanish terms (as with, for example, Rafael’s delightful fixation with *turrón*<sup>77</sup>).

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<sup>73</sup> Letter 33.

<sup>74</sup> Letter 106.

<sup>75</sup> e.g., “A few *meters* short of the convent door, I stopped at a stream by the side of the road and cooled myself off” (Letter 10, emphasis added).

<sup>76</sup> e.g., “I need to pay the practicum fees, which will be some 50 *pesetas*, and get a drawing board from the school, which is 25 *pesetas*. I’m sure I’ll have to pay the ‘teacher’ his 10 *duros* in advance, and I have to pay the boarding house through the end of the month” (Letter 7).

<sup>77</sup> A type of nougat, traditionally eaten in Spain at Christmastime (see e.g. Letter 87).

The vow of conversion, or *conversatio morum*, is variously translated as “conversion of life” and “conversion of manners.” Spanish Trappists vow “*conversión de costumbres*,” which might be called the conversion of one’s customs:

What is meant by this is the conversion of one’s customs, that is, the transformation of the interior habits of the soul. ... [A Trappist] has renounced the world and ought to abandon its spirit as well. ... The object of our vow of conversion of customs is continual transformation, in which the soul is purified, progresses in the way of virtue, and is united to God in sweet, intimate friendship.<sup>78</sup>

In other words, the Trappist vows to continually conform oneself to the monastic lifestyle, regardless of personal preferences or the individuality that one may have known in the world. By pursuing a radically collective existence grounded in poverty, chastity, and obedience, monastics aim to be rid of the ego that stands as an obstacle between God and the soul. This vow of conversion, then, is a vow to lay aside all manner of personal habits in the interest of pursuing God alone. This was, above all, Rafael’s most deeply held belief: that “God alone” was the only peace or happiness to be found in this life and the next.

By pushing back against the ego and pointing toward God, conversion spurs both Trappist monastics and their translators toward ever greater simplicity and austerity, which in my case, has meant restraint not just in the translation itself but in my use of

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<sup>78</sup> *La vida cisterciense en el monasterio de San Isidro de Dueñas* 64–65. Translation my own.

footnotes. I have made an effort to restrict my editorial interventions to those that are most essential to facilitate the reader's encounter with Rafael's spirituality, which naturally include many notes on his life and historical context. However, as previously stated, I did not aim to replicate the thoroughness of a definitive scholarly edition, seeing as this book is intended for a devotional reader.

This principle of conversion has been my greatest challenge as an academic, a profession that values analysis above all else. In pursuing this philological, somewhat documentary project, my fundamental aim is not to present an analysis of Rafael's life and writings, but to facilitate one. I have certainly provided an interpretation of his writings in the most fundamental sense—what else is a translation, after all, but assigning meaning to a text? Nevertheless, I heeded the call to conversion by refraining from critique, both in my notes and in this introduction, insofar as is possible. While I hope to present my analysis of Rafael's spirituality and literary contributions in future projects, it is not my voice but his that must prevail as we lay the foundation for English-language study of his work.

## **Conclusion**

In both maintaining Rafael's voice and making it accessible to a modern reader, I have aimed to remember that Trappists do not hold these vows of stability and conversion in tension, but rather in tandem. To make Rafael simultaneously specific and universal is not a contradictory project, but a harmonious one. By picking up his spiritual writings in the first place, Rafael's readers across time and space are already making an act of trust that they have something to learn from him. After all, in the Catholic tradition, that is why we read saints, for companionship on the journey. In observing God sanctify Rafael

then and there, we are strengthened in our belief that he will sanctify us here and now.

That is ultimately what my own experience has been as a translator who shares the religious beliefs of my subject, as well as some of his circumstances.

What is the message spoken by the life and works of St. Rafael Arnáiz Barón? I posed this question at the outset of this introduction with the understanding that the Holy Spirit will speak a different answer to the soul of each reader. As such, for now, all I can do is share the answer spoken to mine: sanctification feels uniquely difficult in every era, but it's a relatively simple proposition. In sickness and in health, in war and peace, in the monastery and in the world, "God alone is enough."<sup>79</sup> With each page of this translation, each line, each word, I have looked for God at work in an utterly imperfect soul. In the end, my aim has been relatively similar to Rafael's own in pursuing the monastic life: *quaerere Deum*, to seek God.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Letter 76.

<sup>80</sup> On monasticism broadly and monastic learning specifically as oriented toward the search for God, see Pope Benedict XVI, *Address to Representatives from the World of Culture* (Collège des Bernardins, Paris, September 12, 2008).



## I. Juvenilia

### *Letters to family and friends as a child and student, 1921–1933*

Rafael Arnáiz Barón was born in Burgos on April 9, 1911, the eldest child of the engineer Rafael Arnáiz Sánchez de la Campa and the newspaper columnist Mercedes Barón Torres. He was baptized at the Church of Saint Agatha (*Santa Águeda*) on April 21, 1911; confirmed at the School of the Child Jesus (*Colegio del Niño Jesús*) on December 1, 1913; and received First Communion at the Monastery of the Visitation (*Monasterio de la Visitación*) on October 25, 1919. Rafael had three younger siblings, Luis Fernando (b. 1913), Leopoldo (b. 1914), and Mercedes, better known as “Merceditas” (b. 1917). Like their parents, all four children were devout Catholics, and observed daily devotions of prayer both individually and as a family. In 1922, when Rafael was 11 years old, the Arnáiz Barón family moved from Burgos to Oviedo. They took in Petra Sánchez de la Campa y Tasquer, Rafael’s paternal great-aunt, who lived with them until her death in August 1934.<sup>81</sup>

In many ways, Rafael’s family situation reflected the political tensions of the time, tensions that would spill into a civil war that would define the last years of his life. When Rafael was born in 1911, Spain was ruled by the fragile parliamentary monarchy of Alfonso XIII, a regime that his family enthusiastically supported. Rafael’s father descended from a rich landholding family, while his mother was born into a military family in the Philippines in 1898, the year that Spain lost its last colonies to the United

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<sup>81</sup> For a complete chronology, see OC 1003; for Petra Sánchez de la Campa y Tasquer, see OC 296.

States.<sup>82</sup> This combination of monarchist beliefs, family wealth, nostalgia for an imperial past, and Catholic devotion represented a significant portion of the right-wing sentiment on one side of Spain's increasing polarization in this era, while socialist, communist, anarchist, and anticlerical movements emerged on the left in response to widespread economic and institutional crises. While Rafael does not often address politics directly in these early writings, his social position certainly informed his sense of responsibility and filial piety as an eldest son.

Eager to please his father the engineer, but also utterly gifted as an artist and architect-in-training, Rafael dedicated much of his youth to cultivating his talent in art and mathematics. From drawing to painting to stained-glass design, Rafael delighted in using his artistic capabilities to give glory to God in religious projects, but they also brought out a certain ambition in him. In a letter to his father about a drawing exam, Rafael bragged, "I wouldn't have traded my drawing for that of any of the other seventy students who were in the class ... There were some people who should have gotten a Y or a Z instead of an F."<sup>83</sup> Moments like these make his spiritual transformation all the more stark, as Rafael's thoughtfulness and humility increased both with his age and with the deepening of certain influential relationships.

The most significant of these was Rafael's intense spiritual friendship with his aunt and uncle, María Osorio and Leopoldo "Polín" Barón. After finishing his secondary

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<sup>82</sup> Antonio Martín Fernández-Gallardo, *San Rafael Arnáiz Barón: vida y mensaje del Hermano Rafael* (Madrid: Edibesa, 2009), 27.

<sup>83</sup> Letter 2.

education in 1929, Rafael and his sister Mercedes took a trip to Pedrosillo, María and Polín's estate in Ávila.<sup>84</sup> There, the couple began to encourage their nephew to consider a religious vocation. Alongside his trips to Ávila, Rafael was also influenced by his visits to Toro, where his grandmother Fernanda Torres and family friend Rosa Calvo lived. It is in a letter to Rosa, who also encouraged Rafael's vocation, where his deep appreciation for the guidance of his devout elders is most apparent. Recalling their lifelong friendship, Rafael extols his great "fortune of stumbling through life with the affection and example of good people."<sup>85</sup>

While the idea of a religious vocation percolated in the back of his mind, Rafael moved to Madrid in 1930 to continue his studies at the Higher Technical School of Architecture. In some ways, his letters from this period sound like those of any typical college student. He complains about his quirky calculus instructor, tells his brother about the antics he and his best friend Juan Vallauré got up to at their boardinghouse, and of course, writes his parents to ask for money.<sup>86</sup> His letters bubble over with humor and joy, but also a certain inability to be serious, as when he reacts to the 1933 general elections:

Long live the social revolution!!! Long live Larramendi!! Don't vote for the radicals!!! Long live the Christmas holidays, which will start any day now! Long

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<sup>84</sup> Gonzalo María Fernández, *God Alone: A Spiritual Biography of Blessed Rafael Arnáiz Barón*, trans. Hugh McCaffery (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2008), 8.

<sup>85</sup> Letter 5.

<sup>86</sup> Letters 6, 8, and 9 respectively.

live descriptive geometry! As you can see, long live everything. I never say die, it's not in my nature.<sup>87</sup>

But in between the equally endearing and frustrating anecdotes of his college years, Rafael's letters provide glimpses into his spiritual growth. Responding to the news of his great-uncle's serious illness, he puts his own complaints about financial straits and school struggles in perspective:

“Poor old man, he has so little left to overcome in this life, and it'll be the best day when he brings us joy by going up to heaven. I know that no human being says that sort of thing, but since I am a Christian I do say it . . . for the greatest mercy of God is a good death. That's how everything ends: crowns for sale, *pesetas*, descriptive geometry, right down the list of everything surrounding us . . . and then only one thing remains . . . God.”<sup>88</sup>

It is this perspective of eternity, somewhat concealed underneath ebullient storytelling and nostalgic postcards, that ultimately led Rafael to give up his architectural career and treasured friendships to enter the monastery at San Isidro de Dueñas. In these letters, we can come to appreciate what it meant for Rafael to sacrifice his future in this world by observing how much he once truly loved it.

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<sup>87</sup> Letter 9.

<sup>88</sup> Letter 9.

**1. to Rafael Arnáiz Sánchez de la Campa<sup>89</sup>**

Madrid, April 2, 1921<sup>90</sup>

My dearest Papá,

I got here in good shape and without getting queasy at all. I didn't have time to write you yesterday. I'm sending you this postcard I painted. I'm very happy. Yesterday I went to my cousins' house.<sup>91</sup>

Give the little ones lots of kisses for me.<sup>92</sup> A big hug from your son,

*Rafael*

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<sup>89</sup> Rafael Arnáiz Sánchez de la Campa (1882–1949) was Saint Rafael's father and namesake.

<sup>90</sup> Rafael was ten years old when he wrote this postcard from Madrid, where he accompanied his mother, Mercedes Barón Torres, on a trip to visit his sick grandmother, Fernanda Torres Erro.

<sup>91</sup> *My cousins*: The four children of Fernanda Barón Torres (the twin sister of Mercedes, Rafael's mother) and her husband Francisco Fontanals. Their names were Paco, Álvaro, Enrique, and Fernanda. The Fontanals-Barón family lived on Calle Atocha in Madrid (OC 30).

<sup>92</sup> *The little ones*: Rafael's three siblings, Luis Fernando (b. 1913), Leopoldo (b. 1914), and Mercedes, better known as "Merceditas" (b. 1917).

**2. to Rafael Arnáiz Sánchez de la Campa**

Pedrosillo (Ávila), June 23, 1930<sup>93</sup>

My dearest father,

I haven't written you for a few days now, and although of course I have no excuse, I must tell you I've been very busy in every way.

Happily, I just finished my exam in statue drawing. They gave us Michelangelo's Moses, which you'll be familiar with, and I got a very good spot, to the side. I started out very calmly and coolly, despite the time they'd scheduled for us, which was 9pm–1am. The exam lasts three days, and people fail the exam because they get tired. It's less an exam and more an endurance test. Not for me, though. I took a liking to the figure, so I enjoyed starting it and had no setbacks. It didn't seem as though it took that long to me. If I may say so, it turned out rather well, and I'm just being honest, I wouldn't have traded my drawing for that of any of the other seventy students who were in the class. Then again, I wasn't surprised at how many people failed. There were some people who should have gotten a Y or a Z instead of an F.

I'm exceedingly hopeful, and I'd be very surprised if I fail. It will be as God wishes it. Since I've worked hard during the course, I hope it will go well.

They'll send my grades to Pedrosillo, and I'll tell you how it went. As you can imagine, my heart has been pounding for a few days now.

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<sup>93</sup> Pedrosillo was the Ávila estate of Rafael's maternal uncle, Leopoldo Barón, and his wife, María Osorio, whom he was visiting. In 1930, when he wrote the letters and postcards that follow, Rafael was 19 years old.

On the feast of Corpus Christi,<sup>94</sup> I went to see Uncle Juan Antonio in Ciempozuelos.<sup>95</sup> As soon as I arrived, I ran into the doctor who is attending him. He's a very friendly man. He asked me who I was going to see, and when I gave him Uncle's information, he told me that my arrival was providential, because the patient in question wanted to leave the very next day at all costs, and he was very determined to do so, but the doctor was convinced that he would be cured if he stayed. We went to go see him, and between the doctor and me, we convinced him to stay. The doctor told him that he'd been tricking him over the past four days, and instead of giving him the four centigrams of pantopon<sup>96</sup> he'd been receiving daily, he'd gone the whole day with just half a centigram without even noticing it, because he'd been given the same injections at the same times every day. That proves it's all just his imagination, and the doctor is certain that he can take it away completely within just a few days, and then his leg can heal, and he might even leave the hospital on foot if possible. In light of this, and other reasons, Uncle decided to stay; I don't know how long.

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<sup>94</sup> *Corpus Christi*: In 1930, the feast of the Body and Blood of Christ, which is celebrated on the Thursday after Trinity Sunday, fell on June 19.

<sup>95</sup> *Juan Antonio*: Juan Antonio Arnáiz Sánchez de la Campa, Rafael's only paternal uncle. At the time, he was a patient at St. Joseph Psychiatric Hospital (*Sanatorio Psiquiátrico de San Jose*) in Ciempozuelos, Spain, outside Madrid. The hospital is run by the Brothers Hospitallers of Saint John of God, a Spanish religious order founded in 1572.

<sup>96</sup> *Pantopon*: An opiate sometimes used as an alternative to morphine.

He told me not to tell you all these details and just to say that he's doing very well, and indeed he is. Afterward Luis Quílez came to see him, and he gave me a ride back in his car. I'd gone by train, because it's 38 kilometers on foot, which would have tired me out quite a bit.<sup>97</sup> I met his wife and children, and they told me to give their regards to Aunt Petra and to all of you.<sup>98</sup>

The doctor's address is:	Don José González Pinto
	St. Joseph Psychiatric Hospital
	Brothers Hospitallers of St. John of God
	Ciempozuelos (Madrid)

I couldn't see the director because he was busy with the procession they were having,<sup>99</sup> but if you write somebody, the doctor's your best bet.

Afterward, I had dinner at my grandmother's place.<sup>100</sup> She's doing well now, and one of these days she'll go outside and head home to Toro. The next day, at 10:05, I went to Ávila, having sent notice via telegram the previous day. I've already arrived, and I'm sure the telegram will get here one of these days. I mention it because if you want to congratulate me or tell me something via telegram, make sure to give it time, because nothing gets here.

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<sup>97</sup> 38 kilometers is equivalent to 23.6 miles.

<sup>98</sup> Petra Sánchez de la Campa y Tasquer, Rafael's paternal great-aunt, who was living with the Arnáiz-Barón family in Oviedo at the time.

<sup>99</sup> The feast of Corpus Christi is traditionally celebrated with a Eucharistic procession.

<sup>100</sup> *My grandmother*: Fernanda Torres Erro.



I'd ask you, if you haven't already packed the trunk, to please put a set of strings in there, and some picks, and a patch, and a banjo tuning key, and don't forget to put some candy or something for my cousins.<sup>101</sup> And just so you know, tomorrow, June 24, is Aunt María's name day, just for your own awareness. And don't forget to put a little pack of Capstans in there for me.<sup>102</sup> I'm sure you're thinking "all right, that's a bit much," and if that's the case send me a letter or give me a call, whatever's easiest for you. But for goodness' sake, do send me something.

Forgive me for being such a bossy, boring bum, but since I don't see you anymore, please at least remind me that you exist and that I have parents and brothers and a sister and an aunt, all of whom are very loving and write me long letters all the time . . . Ahem . . . Ahem . . .

As you can imagine, I'm loving Pedrosillo. Today I went into Ávila with Uncle Polín to go to the cattle market, and we bought two pairs of oxen. We managed to bargain one down to 7.525 *reales*<sup>103</sup> by haggling for an hour and a half . . . It's so fun. The cattle prices are higher than they were last year.

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<sup>101</sup> *My cousins*: The five children of Leopoldo Barón and María Osorio: Dolores, Leopoldo, Pilar, Fernando, and Blanca.

<sup>102</sup> *Capstans*: Capstan is a British brand of cigarettes.

<sup>103</sup> *Reales*: Prior to the introduction of the euro, the *peseta* was the currency of Spain. A *real* was equivalent to 25 *céntimos* (cents), or one-quarter of a *peseta*.

I'm doing some sketches for the stained-glass windows for the chapel.<sup>104</sup> We spend all day with water pumps and shovels and hoes. The house is a mess because they're getting some work done, so there's nowhere to sit down, and cigarette butts all over the floor. Aunt María's molars are killing her; the poor thing is out of sorts. Mademoiselle can't speak Spanish, and my cousins are always in the way . . . but we're all doing well, everybody is healthy and happy. What more could you want? I suppose you're all doing well too, and all very healthy.

Well, I'll leave it there, it's 11 o'clock now, and tomorrow we have Mass at seven-thirty, so we need to get up at the crack of dawn.

Give lots of hugs to my aunt<sup>105</sup> for me, and to your children. All my affection to you and my mother. Your son, who is thinking of you,

*Rafael*

Don't forget about the trunk with everything I asked for (if you haven't already sent it).

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<sup>104</sup> Rafael designed the stained-glass windows for the chapel at Pedrosillo (see figure 1).

<sup>105</sup> That is, Aunt Petra.



Cristaleras que Rafael pintó para el palacio de sus tíos los Duques de Maqueda, en la finca de Pedrosillo (Avila) en 1930.

(Cfr. Obras Completas del Hno. Rafael, carta 4, nº 7, del 23-junio-1930 a su padre desde allí).

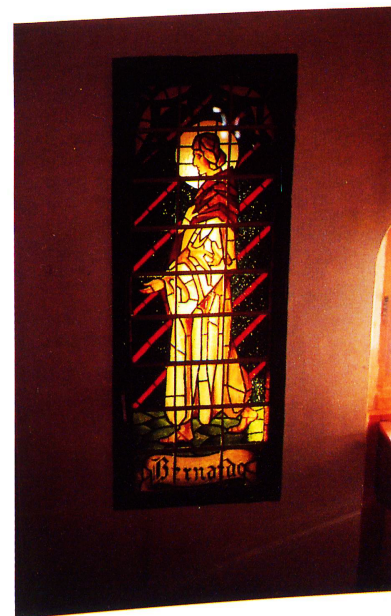


Fig. 1: Rafael with the stained-glass windows he painted at Pedrosillo.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Antonio Cobos Soto, *La pintura mensaje del Hermano Rafael: Estudio crítico de la obra pictórica del venerable Rafael Arnáiz Barón, monje trapense* (Burgos: Monte Carmelo, 1989), 47.

**3. Postcards from Salamanca<sup>107</sup>**

Salamanca, July 12, 1930

To his brother Luis Fernando

A million hugs from your brother, who is thinking of you very much in this blessed place,

*Rafael*

To his brother Leopoldo

Another million hugs, so you don't fight with your brother Fernando, from your other brother,

*Rafael*

To his siblings

A very tiny, microscopic kiss from your brother, who is your senior in age, dignity, and self-control,

*Rafael*

To his drawing instructor Eugenio Tamayo

Thinking of you fondly in this city of such beauty, with so many interesting monuments,

*Rafael*

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<sup>107</sup> After visiting his maternal grandmother, Fernanda Torres Erro, and aunt, María Josefa Barón Torres, in Toro in the summer of 1930, Rafael headed home to Oviedo. On the way, he stopped in Salamanca, from which he sent these four postcards. He was 19 years old at the time.

**4. to Mercedes Barón Torres**

Pedrosillo (Ávila), July 18, 1930

My dearest mother,

You can't imagine how much I miss the violin and updates from you. What's going on? Please, all of you, try not to forget about your son, who loves you so much and is sending a thousand hugs your way,

*Rafael*

5. to Rosa Calvo<sup>108</sup>Oviedo, January 10, 1932<sup>109</sup>

Dearest Aunt Ropi,

See, I am calling you my aunt, even though we once agreed—I don't know if you'll remember this—that you and I had a much closer relationship than that, so it would seem much more appropriate to me to begin this letter by saying, “My dear sister Rosa.”

I am sure it will be a surprise to receive a letter from me. Perhaps you will not even remember who I am, but I'll remind you. The writer of this letter is that boy who, on a certain day that the Lord saw fit to choose, accompanied a holy man to the city of Toro. That holy man was Uncle Polín<sup>110</sup> and his companion was your humble servant, who had the fortune of stumbling through life with the affection and example of good people.

And so, dearest Rosa, now you must know who I am.

So now, you must be asking yourself, “why is Rafael writing me?” Well, for a very simple reason: your brother Rafael thinks of Rosa often, and is making use of a free moment to let her know that; and to tell her that in such times as these, when God has permitted that men should fight amongst themselves as if they were not brothers, that

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<sup>108</sup> Rosa Calvo was a friend who worked as a lottery administrator in Toro, where Rafael's maternal grandmother lived. Rafael wrote this letter from his family's home.

<sup>109</sup> Rafael was 21 years old when he wrote Letters 8 and 9.

<sup>110</sup> *Uncle Polín*: Rafael's uncle Leopoldo Barón; see Letter 15.

hatred and vengeance should be unleashed upon the world, and that God's creatures should rebel against their Creator . . . In such times, souls who suffer when God suffers and try with their small, meager love to return that immense, infinite love of the Master for his children ought to be united, consoling and aiding and comforting one another, so that, with hearts and prayers united, we might ask God to take pity on the world. Let us pray with Saint Teresa: "Lord, either bring the world to an end or provide a remedy for these very serious evils." And afterwards she added, "Do it, Lord, if You will You can."<sup>111</sup>

That is, this Saint asked Him to provide a remedy if He wanted, for He could if He wanted to. And so, dear Rosa, let's not worry; for if He wants to, He will fix everything. May his divine will be done, for just as we men and women do not understand the Lord's designs, neither do we understand what is good for us nor that He orders things toward our good and His greater glory.

We used to talk so much, didn't we? Do you remember those times we spent at the Lottery, when we'd talk about God and humanity and La Trapa? Do you remember

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<sup>111</sup> "Well, what is this, my Lord and my God! Either bring the world to an end or provide a remedy for these very serious evils. . . . I beseech You, Eternal Father, that You suffer them no longer. Stop this fire, Lord, for if You will You can" (Saint Teresa of Ávila, *The Way of Perfection* [Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 2013], 35.4).

how my grandmother<sup>112</sup> or Aunt María<sup>113</sup> would ask “where’s Rafael?” and they would already know, “either with Uncle Polín, or with Rosa at the Lottery.”

Perhaps someday we can resume our visits once more, even though . . . it doesn’t really matter, right? . . . We must take them up again if God wills it, but somewhere else where nobody will interrupt us . . . Let’s wait, though, let’s wait, for the day is not far off. Let’s not force it, or worry about having a good time down here or trying to do what is most pleasing to us, completely failing to remember that neither our will, nor our whims, nor even our heart should guide us—as if all those things were ours!—but rather it is His will alone that we should obey. And so, dear Rosa, do not worry about anything, or shed tears in anyone’s absence, or grow sad over what we see as misfortune. Let’s just wait, and wait with our hearts lifted up in peace and our souls at rest in God, for once you have and possess God, what more could you want? You have everything.

Well, dear Rosa, forgive me. I sound like a church lady’s prayerbook. Sometimes my pen gets ahead of me and I don’t know what I’m saying anymore, or who I’m saying it to. How absurd, to recommend peace and joy to you, when what I should do is ask you for some of the peace and joy you already have! I’m being silly.

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<sup>112</sup> Fernanda Torres Erro, Rafael’s maternal grandmother

<sup>113</sup> María Josefa Barón Torres, Rafael’s aunt, who lived in Toro with Fernanda



Well, leaving all that aside, tell me how you are, how the Lottery<sup>114</sup> is going, how your uncle is, if you are cold, etc. . . . You know I care about everything going on with you, although I know perfectly well that you are not going to write me, nor do I ask you to. In fact I forbid you to, because I know it hurts your eyes. So don't think I will be offended or anything, quite the contrary. I'll keep writing you all the same, even if I don't have anything in particular to tell you, other than that I start classes tomorrow, Monday, at the university, that my brothers and sisters are doing well and my parents too, etc. . . .

What you can do is, when Uncle Polín next comes to Toro, send me word through him. And one thing I will ask of you: when you are with the Master in the mornings, tell Him not to let me fall from His hands. You'll say I'm a bit selfish, but there's nothing to be done about that; I rely on and trust in your prayers more than mine, which always reach Him cold and scattered. In any case, I will remember you in prayer too. Or rather, I remember you very often, so you should not forget that we came to an agreement last year, and I very much need the prayers of those whom He indulges with such affection as He does you.

I'll stop here, my dear sister Rosa; I have faith in you. With all my affection, your brother in Christ,

*Rafael*

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<sup>114</sup> The Spanish state lottery is an incredibly popular institution, running several games a week building up to the famous annual Christmas lottery. Official lottery outlets like the one Rosa Calvo worked at in Toro are often busy, centrally located community hotspots.

## 6. to Luis Fernando Arnáiz Barón<sup>115</sup>

Madrid, November 4, 1932<sup>116</sup>

My dear brother Fernando,

I was very grateful to receive your letter, because you are the only one in the family who tells stories with any detail. You just have one tiny flaw as a writer, which is that your letters would strain anyone's lungs, let me tell you . . . You know that I like to read with emphasis and pausing after each period, and breathing after each comma . . . So, I started to read, and when I finished, they had to hook me up to an oxygen tank to get artificial respiration going . . . My darling boy . . . you do realize that you wrote ten pages without a comma or one measly period . . . I mean that's fifteen minutes talking without stopping to breathe, which I assure you is extremely unpleasant and poorly tolerated. When you write, please do me the favor of putting a comma every five words, a few question marks, ellipses, exclamation points, quotation marks, etc. All the marks you can think of, and if you don't know where to put them, just do it randomly, or you can make yourself an easy writing rule like this one: put a comma after words that end in o, a period and a comma after stressed words that end in s, an exclamation point after

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<sup>115</sup> Luis Fernando Arnáiz Barón was Rafael's younger brother.

<sup>116</sup> Rafael studied architecture at the Higher Technical School of Architecture of Madrid (*Escuela Técnica Superior de Arquitectura de Madrid*, ETSAM). During his studies, he stayed at a boarding house in the Palacio de la Prensa (lit. "Press Palace"), just off the Plaza de Callao, which is the main square in the university neighborhood (OC 31).

irregular verbs, and so on and so forth . . . You just have to put something, whatever it may be, because you have no business making your fellow man go fifteen minutes without breath.

Anyway, you're getting better at spelling . . . And I won't say anything else about your letter, because it's not as if you wrote me so that I could evaluate you, of course not . . . When a letter arrives from your brother, it's all the same whether it has errors or not . . . and to tell you the truth, I prefer letters with spelling errors to those without. Writing errors reveal the personality of the one who is writing, his temperament and way of being, and if we were all to write the same way, with our silent letters all in place, minding our p's and q's, then the epistolary genre would lose all its charm . . . Leave writing without spelling errors to the academics, those useless gentlemen with their glasses and their petulance and their strange words, fabricated by the Royal Spanish Academy every time you forget an accent mark<sup>117</sup> . . . Ugh! Pay them no mind; you write however you want (but use some commas, for God's sake) and don't worry about anything else.

For example, how much more expressive it is to say: "The cliffs wer steip, the see wuz choppy, and off inn the distants the son hided behind red clouds."

Such a paragraph is far more expressive than one like this: "The colorless, turbulent liquid with which the deep oleaginous expanse and its gleaming edges

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<sup>117</sup> *Royal Spanish Academy*: A government institution dedicated to conserving the Spanish language, best known for its notably rigorous dictionary.

crashed—no, splashed—over the marbled granite rock of the shore’s unfeeling crags resembled a shining sea of classical beauty.”

All right, I think by now I will have convinced you . . . and if not, suit yourself.

I bought myself a bird, which cost me two *pesetas*.<sup>118</sup> I keep him in a cage with some lettuce, and I give him bird seed . . . If he doesn’t die on me by December, I’ll bring him back home with me . . . It’s stupendously corny, this business of having a bird by the window to monkey around with from time to time.

The alumna<sup>119</sup> gave us three carnations, which we’ve put in a vase with some water, next to the bird . . . As you can see, the corniness continues . . . the bird, the flowers, and—brace yourself—a gramophone playing tangos . . . The alumna also left us the gramophone, because it turns out it doesn’t fit in her room. Trust me, her room is so small that three people couldn’t stand in it, and of course, a portable gramophone takes up quite a bit of space . . . I’m telling you that girl is a gem . . . She got rid of all the stains

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<sup>118</sup> *Pesetas*: The *peseta* was the currency of Spain before the adoption of the euro in 2002.

<sup>119</sup> *Alumna*: Rafael refers to this fellow guest at the boarding house only as “*la licenciada*,” a woman with a university degree, uncommon in 1932. Her name is unknown, but Rafael’s friend Juan Vallauré mentioned her in his testimony for Rafael’s cause: “There was a woman staying at the [Plaza de] Callao boarding house who was older than we were . . . [Rafael] had a friendly relationship with her, perfectly normal and sincere” (Summ 169).

on my coat for me, and is going to mend Juan's<sup>120</sup> raincoat for him, and today she invited us for *buñuelos de viento*.<sup>121</sup> All this in exchange for just a bit of conversation, and she talks enough for fourteen people—not to mention the hysterical laugh she lets out in the dining room. One time they had to give her an injection to calm her down.

After praying the rosary we went out into the hall and danced a *jota*.<sup>122</sup>

Afterwards we performed the *Tenorio*,<sup>123</sup> and there I was, donning a red quilt with a paintbrush tucked into my hat, saying to Doña Inés: “Oh, my angel of love, do you see . . . ?”<sup>124</sup> when we heard some applause coming from the patio. It was the landlady of the boarding house, along with all the maids . . . I didn't know what to do with the quilt, so we had to keep going . . . Anyway, the last thing you'd expect your brother to be doing . .

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<sup>120</sup> *Juan*: Juan Vallauré Fernández-Peña (1910–1975), Rafael's close friend, classmate, and roommate at the boarding house. He went on to become an architect in Oviedo and was an important witness in the beatification process. He named one of his sons after Rafael.

<sup>121</sup> *Buñuelos de viento*: A pastry popular in Madrid.

<sup>122</sup> *Jota*: A Spanish dance with many regional variations, often accompanied by castanets.

<sup>123</sup> *Tenorio*: The longest-running play in Spain, *Don Juan Tenorio* was written by José Zorrilla in 1844. In it, the infamous womanizer Don Juan ultimately begs for mercy and is accompanied to heaven by the saintly Doña Inés, whom he had abandoned and caused to die of heartbreak.

<sup>124</sup> “*Oh, my angel of love*”: Don Juan's romantic overture to Doña Inés after kidnapping her from a convent (José Zorrilla, *Don Juan Tenorio* [Project Gutenberg, 2001], I.IV.III).

. the *Tenorio* . . . but there was nothing else we could do . . . I had to do something to justify what I was doing with a quilt and a paintbrush in the band of my hat.

I'm sending you an article that I read in a French newspaper that I bought. Since it's about aviation, you'll enjoy it, and you can use it to practice translating . . . It's very interesting. I'm also sending your preparation materials, and . . . I still haven't gone to Cuatro Vientos<sup>125</sup> . . . Look, it's a trek.

Tell your mother that the stamps she sent me are much more useful than the calcium supplements, which I took two boxes of . . . These are at least good for something.

I am in good health, and you? Good, glad to hear it.

The price of canaries has fallen 5 cents, from 70 to 65. A stroke of luck.

This hooded pajama concept sounds excellent. I suppose it looks like this [*a drawing follows*]. Am I right? . . . From the description you gave me, I'm sure you look very imposing in it, although it's much more like Leopoldo<sup>126</sup> to wear such a thing. Moreover I figure [*another drawing follows*] that he's still playing with that yo-yo, so obviously I imagine him wearing a bathrobe<sup>127</sup> . . . and of course, lounging around in a bathrobe, he must be very bored, and the yo-yo thus represents a diversion.

I'm also sending you a triptych of mine. As you'll see I look very irritated, like when something's been confiscated from you.

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<sup>125</sup> *Cuatro Vientos*: An airfield at the edge of Madrid.

<sup>126</sup> *Leopoldo*: Their younger brother, Leopoldo Arnáiz Barón.

<sup>127</sup> *Bathrobe*: This is what Rafael drew next to the original text.

I'll send you the photographs of Toledo when they are developed, probably in Oviedo, because Juan has the negatives and they turn out much better in Oviedo.<sup>128</sup> Their work is much better there, and they use better paper, and whatnot . . . photographs from Oviedo have a certain quality the ones from Madrid just don't have . . . Of course, it's not all that important, what do I know . . . but they are cheaper, I think . . . but even that doesn't really matter because I think we have about 30 negatives, and at a rate of 15 or 20 cents, it'll only cost about a *duro*<sup>129</sup> . . . Are you following all this? . . . Well, I figure you are, and if not, well . . . suit yourself.

Your cigar idea—that is, your cigar *bands* idea—seems very good to me, a very wise move . . . go on, keep collecting things and you'll see if your grandchildren make fun of you . . . Well, I'd prefer a collection of cigar bands to having a bird and some birdseed . . . don't you think? Well, nothing to be done about that.

Mamá asked me if this house had heating . . . Tell her that we have to shut the radiators, because if we don't, we'll roast . . . The whole house has central heating, and the cold season “officially” began on the first of November, so I don't even want to tell you what the house is like right now . . . like an oven . . . and I got another cold, so I've spent all day expelling mucous substances . . . what a mess . . . and what I feel worst about is that now I have to wash more handkerchiefs . . . I am a disaster with this blessed secretion.

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<sup>128</sup> *Toledo*: Rafael was in Toledo with Juan Vallaure on October 12 and 13, 1932.

<sup>129</sup> *Duro*: A five-peseta coin.

My class schedule begins with calculus, from eight to nine in the morning, with a gentleman who explains mathematics from memory, doesn't call on anyone, and instead of passing around an attendance sheet, he asks everyone in class one by one what our names are. It takes forever, of course, because he has to make a new list every day . . . He says he doesn't write down absences, but rather attendances . . . So of course, somebody comes up to him one day and says, "Señor Cámara, would you please do me the favor of excusing my absence yesterday, because I couldn't come for such and such a reason . . . ?" And Señor Cámara responds, "No, because I haven't marked you down as absent. You can be absent all you want because I don't mark absences, I mark attendances." But then later, after the exam, he'll say, "You're doing well, but you have a forty-seven-and-a-half percent attendance rate, and for me you need at least a seventy percent . . ." Anyway, his bookkeeping is absurd . . . Such strange things happen at this school.

From nine to ten I have descriptive geometry, with Señor Mosteiro. He is a very pompous gentleman who looks like Muñoz Seca<sup>130</sup> [*a drawing follows*] and lectures about geometry without getting up from his seat, making a student stand at the blackboard and do whatever he says, and whoever understands it understands it, and whoever doesn't better deal with it . . .

There are about seventy students in that class, fifteen enrolled and the rest auditing. Of the fifteen who are enrolled, ten of them are repeating the course because

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<sup>130</sup> *Muñoz Seca*: Pablo Muñoz Seca (1879–1936), a comedic playwright and actor known for his handlebar mustache.



that man is a monster; I'm telling you, you get out of one bad situation only to end up someplace worse.

We're like little schoolboys or worse. Plus, in some of the less decent classrooms, we have to take notes on our laps, and whoever gets there first takes the seats up front to be able to hear, because anyone in the back might as well not be in class. The real work has to get done at home, because the school itself is just for introducing yourself and getting instructions, because the matter of learning . . . what Mosteiro does can be done by anybody looking at a book.

Next month we'll start practicums, and those take a lot of time. Anyway . . . at ten I go home to study and at noon I go to Mass or I keep studying, or rather, deciphering my class notes. I eat at two. Afterwards I do nothing. At four I take the metro and get off at Goya to go to my friend Evia's house. He and I study for calculus together until six-thirty or so, and after *merienda*,<sup>131</sup> I go back home and study for descriptive geometry. If I have time, I write letters to family or I go for a walk. Then, at nine-thirty, I have dinner. Afterwards, you can guess. And so, little by little, we get by.

I have just received 50 *pesetas* from my father, whom I thank profusely. Now all that remains is for me to receive the trunk. I went by the post office again today and it's still not here, but I await the Pamplona sausage with great excitement.

Anyway, I'm writing this letter in fits and starts, so as you can tell it's all over the place, but that's the only way I can write. I don't have time to sit and write nonsense for

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<sup>131</sup> *Merienda*: A light meal, often involving a hot beverage and a sandwich or sweets. It generally falls in the late afternoon, between lunch and dinner.

two hours straight, so perhaps this letter is dated one way now and will arrive with a different date entirely, but I suppose you won't mind.

Today Atilano, Vallauré, and I went up to Cerro de los Ángeles,<sup>132</sup> not on any pilgrimage, mind you, but just because it's the first Friday of the month so Father Colón had to go preach a sermon and we shared a taxi. There were very few people there, and it was delightful; Juan, who'd never been there before, liked it very much.

I have nothing to tell you about Madrid and its residents. People keep going, some fast and others slow, depending on what they have to do, and foot traffic is far too busy . . . Lots of begging, lottery ticket sellers, and taxis . . . honking, stomping, lights going on and off, shop windows showing off expensive things; and meanwhile, the sky, which is the most beautiful part of Madrid, is cut to pieces, injured by the endless cables of its trams and the eaves of its buildings . . . and you can't look up, because if you do, your foot will get stomped on or your handkerchief will get stolen (note that I don't say your wallet, because I don't carry one).

The porter here is all shoulders, with hair like a brush and a scar over his eye, always staring at the ground [*a drawing follows*] when anybody contradicts him. The elevator operator collects postage stamps and film-star trading cards. The boarding-house cook is very skinny and ignorant, and Juan is always laying it on thick with her: the rice was *so tasty*, the soup was *delicious*, even the most overdone meat *she cooks just right* . .

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<sup>132</sup> *Cerro de los Ángeles*: A hill in Getafe, just south of Madrid. The Monument to the Sacred Heart of Jesus was built there in 1916, along with a 14<sup>th</sup>-century monastery dedicated to Our Lady of the Angels—the hill's namesake.

. And of course, she does take care when she pleases, like with baked apples or purée . . .  
In any case, every day he goes by the kitchen and gives her a “menu,” but she says: “Nah,  
yer jus’ bein’ selfish!”

They’ve put a new carpet in the hall, and it’s made me absolutely hopeless,  
because the moment I see a long strip of fabric with fringe at each side stretched out on  
the floor . . . I am filled with an unbearable urge to do somersaults, starting at one end  
and going all the way to the other. But since I suffer the misfortune of not knowing how,  
upon simply opening the door and seeing that carpet—so new, grey with red stripes—I  
run straight back to my room. And when I leave again, I don’t look down at the floor,  
because if I do, something takes over my body, something like vertigo . . . and a  
desperate desire to put my hands on the soft, springy floor, squat down, throw my feet in  
the air, trace half a circumference with them, and place them once more on the floor, in  
front of my neck . . . and thus, spinning at great velocity, pulling off a double somersault  
just short of the door . . . Oh! It’s horrible what comes over me, having to run away  
without setting foot on the carpet, my eyes glued to the ceiling . . . because if I look  
down, I’m telling you, I’m either losing my eyesight or my head . . . That blessed carpet  
is making me sick. I’d rather have to cross a ravine on a plank than have to slowly  
traverse that long grey-and-red strip laid over the floor of my hall.

Well, I’ve got nothing else to tell you.

Now I'm listening to Godard's *Jocelyn*<sup>133</sup> on the gramophone . . . It's making my blood boil!! Mamá might understand why. But nothing to be done about that. Anyway, I'll leave you here for now. I have to go cut the carnations' stems and change out the water. The bird has made himself a ball of feathers [*a drawing follows*] and will only show his tail . . . I don't know where his head is. It seems to me, at least, that he is in a deep sleep, but I'm sure when Juan comes he'll wake up . . . I know him. Anyway, it's the next day.

I just got home from class and sat down to continue this letter . . . I don't remember anymore when I started it, but I do know when I'll end it . . . right now. Besides, today is Saturday, so it won't do to leave unfinished business.

Sundays are for resting and nothing else . . . Tomorrow morning I am going to the Monumental Cinema<sup>134</sup> at eleven-thirty to listen to Arbós<sup>135</sup> conduct his orchestra. I'll send Mamá my review, to show her that I can handle anything, and perhaps I'll agree with Turina.<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>133</sup> *Jocelyn*: An opera by the French composer Benjamin Godard that premiered in 1888, *Jocelyn* centers on the temptation of a young seminarian by a passionate love.

<sup>134</sup> *Monumental Cinema*: A movie theatre and concert hall, now known as the Teatro Monumental.

<sup>135</sup> *Arbós*: Enrique Fernández Arbós (1863–1939), a Spanish conductor and composer.

<sup>136</sup> *Turina*: Joaquín Turina Pérez (1882–1936), a composer and music critic for the Madrid daily *El Debate*.

Well, that's all for now. I have things to do, and later I'll go post this "kolossal" letter.

An affectionate goodbye to you and the whole family, with all the hugs and kisses you'd like.

y.b.b.w.h.h. (1)

*Rafael*

(1) = your big brother, with a handshake and a hug.<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> His mother responded to this letter on November 13, 1932, saying, "My dear son: We all read your letter to Fernando a couple of times, but especially your father, who enjoyed reading it out loud, and of course we spent a good while talking about you and your life. Thank God, the letter made it clear you're in good spirits, you must have been to play Don Juan in front of the landlady and the other guests . . ." (OC 107–8).

**7. to Rafael Arnáiz Sánchez de la Campa and Mercedes Barón Torres<sup>138</sup>**

Madrid, October 21, 1933<sup>139</sup>

My dearest parents,

At last I have a free moment, so I've decided to send you some details about my life in Madrid. You already know that I haven't been able to enroll yet . . . the chaos<sup>140</sup> goes on but I am doing well, thanks be to God.

If they let me enroll in everything I've requested, I won't even have time to breathe, but I am dead set on making up for the year I lost last year<sup>141</sup> . . . and if it's up to me . . . so be it.

We have started classes, of course I have my first class at nine in the morning and don't finish until six in the afternoon. We started Infinitesimal Calculus with a teacher who is a force to be reckoned with. On the first day he recommended texts in German and Russian on mechanics, because he also teaches a course on that.

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<sup>138</sup> Rafael's parents

<sup>139</sup> Rafael was 22 years old when he wrote Letters 10–34.

<sup>140</sup> *Chaos*: As the capital of Spain, Madrid experienced the country's ongoing political turmoil acutely. Rafael wrote this letter just before the infamously violent, polarizing elections of November 1933, one of the key events leading up to the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939).

<sup>141</sup> *The year I lost*: From January 25 to July 26, 1933, Rafael completed his compulsory military service in the Spanish Army Corps of Engineers (*Cuerpo de Ingenieros*).

He started by taking differential calculus for granted, so integral calculus is now in full swing . . . I had no idea what he was talking about so I got distracted. See I have the misfortune of having previously studied with Señor Frontera, God forgive him for having passed me. As a result, four other students in the same boat have started to meet for two hours of tutoring on integral calculus every day with a sixth-year, who also has another degree already. He charges us ten *duros* each every month, and we are studying ferociously, because besides Calculus, there will be two other sets of exams—one at the end of January, another in June. I need to pass in January and get it out of the way, so I spend nearly all my time on it. I will also probably be taking Construction I and Detail Drawing. I don't really know, I just go to class as if I were taking them . . . It's up to the registrar.

I get up at seven-thirty every day, believe it or not. But it's true, because when I was here before, I had the good habit of going to Communion every day, and I have found that starting the day by placing yourself in God's hands makes everything go better and makes study much more profitable. If it were not for the Master who helps me so much, I would be completely useless, and besides, I have to be accountable to somebody for my actions, both the good and the bad, right?

Afterwards I go to the classes that I need, depending on the day of the week (I'll send you my schedule when it's set in stone) etc. . . . From six-thirty to eight-thirty I have Calculus, after dinner I study Descriptive Geometry and I end up going to bed exhausted, but satisfied that the day has ended . . . If it weren't for that—for my studies, my responsibilities, my classes, being so busy I don't even have time for *merienda*, etc.—a

quiet life in Madrid would be dreadful to me. So I am not complaining about work, quite the contrary, it's a matter of keeping busy all day.

Well, on to another topic.

I don't remember what day Espinosa told me that he needed 520 *pesetas* to pay the inheritance tax. The next day I went to see Alvear, he told me he was just about to call me that morning, because he was going to Italy that very night . . . anyway, he gave me 500 *pesetas*. I gave them to Espinosa, and he told me that near the beginning of next month, on the 4th or 5th, he would return to the bank with all the documentation and would give me whatever was left of the *pesetas* if anything was left. That's all.

On Sunday<sup>142</sup> I was in Ávila with Uncle Polín, who is always affectionate toward me, and wants me to come as often as I can, so we can enjoy the country air and take walks together on Sundays. I found him looking well, not at all serious, and he is taking care of himself now, not moving around at all, and eating enough. I hope, God willing, that he is on the mend, because he only had one major episode of fatigue last season; for now, Uncle Álvaro<sup>143</sup> is taking care of all his affairs.

I suppose my grandmother will come to Madrid soon, to spend the season with my aunt and uncle.<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> *Sunday*: October 15, that is, the feast of Saint Teresa of Ávila.

<sup>143</sup> *Álvaro*: Álvaro Barón Torres, Rafael's maternal uncle.

<sup>144</sup> *Aunt and uncle*: Rafael's great-aunt and great-uncle, María de los Dolores Sánchez Lafuente and Leopoldo Torres Erro, the Marchioness and Marquess of San Miguel de



The rest of the family, as usual. Today is Saturday, though not really, because I still had Calculus, and tomorrow I have to clean up my Descriptive Geometry notes, or else maybe I would have gone to Ávila, because going there means a lot to me . . . Nothing to be done about that, first things first. Besides, it costs 7.80 *pesetas* each way, and those ten *duros* for the Calculus tutor add up, and what you spend in one place has to come from somewhere else.

Anyway, on that note, you know it's always hard for me to say so . . . I need money, as I am sure you can guess, and as I will demonstrate throughout the following.

The "Electrolux"<sup>145</sup> money is gone, and it's been gone for a while.

I have to register for a greater number of courses, and I need to pay the practicum fees, which will be some 50 *pesetas*, and get a drawing board from the school, which is 25 *pesetas*. I'm sure I'll have to pay the "teacher"<sup>146</sup> his 10 *duros* in advance, and I have to pay the boarding house through the end of the month. I have to buy some books and other little things that I need. I still have 150 *pesetas*, because Juan paid me already. So if you send me 250 *pesetas*, I'll have enough, because my budget (which I am very much simplifying) is as follows:

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Grox. (Because of their noble title, Rafael sometimes called them "Aunt and Uncle San Miguel.") Leopoldo's sister, Fernanda Torres, was Rafael's maternal grandmother.

<sup>145</sup> *Electrolux*: A vacuum cleaner. Rafael had sold one earlier, but that money ran out.

<sup>146</sup> "*Teacher*": In referring to his calculus tutor here, Rafael uses the English word "teacher."

Registration fees	200.00, perhaps less	
Practicum fees	50.00	
Drawing board from the school	25.00	
Boarding house	150.00	
Tutor	50.00	
Books and other little things	<u>25.00</u>	
	500.00	
I have	150.00	
I need	350.00	goodness gracious!!

Well, that's fine, but that's not actually the math I expect. Registration fees should be lower, depending on how many classes they let me enroll in, so taking into consideration what's left over, that should be 300 *pesetas* rather than 350 in the end . . . that's right, some 300 rather than 350, that's it.

Good Lord! What a mess, it's always like this, I never have a clue how much money I have or spend or need. Look, please just send me 250, and if I need anything else, I'll ask you for it.

Oh, that reminds me—Espinosa's fees, when should I pay them? When he charges me for the banking matter, or before? Probably before, because he'll be giving me the papers all in order any day now, I suppose, and he won't be waiting around for me to pay him. Look, send me 300 *pesetas* so I can pay him, because I owe him 20 *pesetas* (it was 520, and I only gave him 500).

Or, look, don't send me anything, and then we can be done already. Let's do a test and see if I can sort this out on my own.

I have accounted for everything I spent: I paid some late bills to some magazines, two laundresses, and then the trip to Ávila which cost me 16 *pesetas*. I went to Nocturnal Adoration for four months over the summer, somebody gave me a counterfeit *duro*, I don't know what to do with it, two dozen eggs, three taxis, five basic textbooks, tobacco . . . Anyway, a real mess; my suitcase is full of loose change.

Good Lord, it's not that I disregard money entirely, for it is my father's noble occupation, and I don't know how to earn it. But at times I feel like throwing it away, when I see how poorly I use it and the messes it gets me into.

All right, new paragraph, it's nine-fifty and tomorrow, which is Sunday, I need to get up at dawn, but since I don't have class, instead of going to Mass early, I'll go at nine. Then maybe I'll go to Aunt and Uncle San Miguel's house, and tomorrow night I'll go to Uncle Paco's<sup>147</sup> house for dinner.

Has Antonio<sup>148</sup> gotten over his cold?

I think you can send me 250 *pesetas*. I'll have enough, and if I need anything I'll telephone you, and I'll spend that fake *duro*—let's see if they'll take it at the telephone exchange, since they're foreign-owned, and the operators aren't very bright . . . yep, I don't think I'd feel bad about it. I don't know how I ended up with it, it's practically shouting that it's made of lead, plus it's all bent out of shape.

Well, that's all. Hope you're well, hugs to everybody.

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<sup>147</sup> *Paco*: Rafael's uncle, Don Francisco Fontanals. He was married to Rafael's aunt, Fernanda Barón Torres, who was the twin sister of Rafael's mother Mercedes.

<sup>148</sup> *Antonio*: Probably a servant in the Arnáiz-Barón household (OC footnote 386).

This will go unsigned, since it's anonymous.

**8. Rafael's daily schedule in Madrid<sup>149</sup>**

October 1933

6:30 to 7	Mass
7 to 9	Study Descriptive Geometry and Perspective
9 to 1	Classes
1 to 2	Rest or walk
2 to 3	Lunch
3 to 3:30	Rest
3:30 to 5	Class at the Architecture School
5 to 6	Study Calculus and Mechanics
6 to 6:30	Merienda
6:30 to 7:30	Calculus tutoring
7:30 to 8:30	Study Calculus and Mechanics
8:30 to 9	Visit with the Master
9 to 10	Dinner
10 to 10:30	Study Art History and Construction
11:30	Rosary
12	Go to sleep

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<sup>149</sup> The following words are written in big red letters next to the hours listed on this schedule: *ALL FOR JESUS*.

**9. to Rafael Arnáiz Sánchez de la Campa and Mercedes Barón Torres**

Madrid, November 28, 1933

My dearest parents,

Forgive me for always failing to meet my obligations toward you, as usual . . . A leopard can't change its spots. I knew you would be satisfied with me being in Ávila on Sunday, and next Sunday I'm not sure what I'll do, although Uncle Polín is pleading with me to come back again, and his insistence is so great and my resistance is so little . . . that . . . I don't know. I don't make plans from one day to the next; God guides me and He knows how to do it.

There is one thing I have done without consulting you, because in truth there wasn't time. And besides, knowing that if I hadn't done it, you would have, it was a matter of conscience for me. It has to do with Uncle Polín. As you know, he has put the famous crown<sup>150</sup> up for sale, and it hasn't sold. He put Pedrosillo<sup>151</sup> up for sale at any price, and it hasn't sold. He has Tímulos<sup>152</sup> up for rent and it hasn't been rented. And the

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<sup>150</sup> *The famous crown*: Rafael's aunt and uncle, María Osorio and Leopoldo Barón, were selling off some of their family assets due to financial troubles. The crown mentioned here may be a ducal coronet that María inherited along with her title as Duchess of Maqueda.

<sup>151</sup> *Pedrosillo*: Leopoldo's estate outside of Ávila.

<sup>152</sup> *Tímulos*: A small hamlet outside Toro, home to a hermitage to which Rafael may be referring.

bank has come calling; and so has his landlord and the butcher, etc. . . . And at home, *eight pesetas* without any more in sight, because everything depended on the sale of the jewel, and it's not selling . . .

Do you understand now why he's been sick? . . . I have been living in close proximity to his true *misery*, and although he did not wish it, because the money is not mine, he has had no choice but to allow me to lend him a thousand *pesetas*. The providence of God is watching over him, and has made use of me in this matter. But, as I am sure you will understand, I was moved by my great affection for Uncle Polín, and I know you will not think poorly of this. And on the other hand, it is very painful for me to be there at his house, eating bread that I know very well has not been paid for in quite some time.

He will never complain, nor will he ask for anything himself, even if his children go hungry. But that is what we are for, those of us who are more or less secure.

He put up a real fight, but when you have no choice but to accept, because if not you will risk the same thing that everyone who sees hunger on the horizon is risking, you have no choice but to humble yourself and get through it . . .

I have always been something more than a nephew to Uncle Polín, and he has been something more than an uncle to me . . . The bond of Christian charity unites us, and that is something much greater than kinship.

Of course he will pay me back when the crown sells, or when Pedrosillo does, and though they can be very detached from earthly things, I understand perfectly well what that means. But don't you worry, nothing can get him down. He is always in good spirits, and last week he gained a pound and a half . . . It's clear that God loves him very much,

for God's love is a cross . . . and he carries it joyfully. He turned to Aunt María's family, but that's no family at all . . .

Well, I paid 97 *pesetas* to Espinosa, and 500 to Alvear, plus a bit of his advance and fees. Essentially, with the 100 you sent me, I paid the boarding house and now I've had to start paying back what I hadn't paid before. Between this that and the other thing, as of today, November 27,<sup>153</sup> I have 600 *pesetas* left, plus the thousand that Uncle Polín owes me.

Every day I find money more bothersome . . . everybody is dependent on those rotten *pesetas*, which provide only irritation and envy, and really rather little in the way of satisfaction. I do not ask God for anything more than what is necessary to cover the essentials, and if I can use what is left over to relieve my brother, then I shall; though what is truly beautiful is not giving away what is left over, but rather forfeiting what I spend on impulses, stupid luxuries, and nonsense, of which we will someday give a strict account to God . . . At times, my dear parents, I am deeply ashamed of myself. Of course it is so easy to give away what is not your own . . . but I hope that you will understand, and take care of this.

Uncle Polín thought about writing you the other day, but I told him to wait until I had written you myself, so I could fill you in; if I have acted wrongly . . . I don't know. I did so with the best of intentions and nothing more.

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<sup>153</sup> *November 27*: Probably an error, as the letter was dated and posted on November 28.



Long live the social revolution!!!<sup>154</sup> Long live Larramendi!!<sup>155</sup> Don't vote for the radicals!!!<sup>156</sup> Long live the Christmas holidays, which will start any day now! Long live descriptive geometry! As you can see, long live everything. I never say die, it's not in my nature.

Tell Leopoldo<sup>157</sup> that I was very grateful to receive his letter.

Great-Uncle Leopoldo<sup>158</sup> is getting better now from his cold, which had him in bed for a few days and gave us quite a scare, because the doctor told us he had fluid building up at the base of his lung. Poor old man, he has so little left to overcome in this life, and it'll be the best day when he brings us joy by going up to heaven. I know that no human being says that sort of thing, but since I am a Christian I do say it . . . for the greatest mercy of God is a good death. That's how everything ends: crowns for sale, *pesetas*, descriptive geometry, right down the list of everything surrounding us . . . and then only one thing remains . . . God.

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<sup>154</sup> *Long live the social revolution!!!*: “¡Viva la revolución social!” was a rallying cry for the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party, which lost power in the November 1933 elections.

<sup>155</sup> *Larramendi*: Luis Hernando Larramendi (1882–1957), a politician who advocated monarchism and institutional support for the Catholic Church.

<sup>156</sup> *Radicals*: The Radical Republican Party was founded as a socialist party but had become a center-right group by November 1933. It had a history of anticlericalism.

<sup>157</sup> *Leopoldo*: Rafael's younger brother, Leopoldo Arnáiz Barón.

<sup>158</sup> *Great-Uncle Leopoldo*: Leopoldo Torres Erro.

Well, my dear parents, pardon me this digression; the only great consolation available to every creature is to rise up above all these human trivialities for a moment to contemplate the one and only Truth.

Give my regards to everyone, including Ladreda,<sup>159</sup> who was just elected, and the Ursuline sisters, and everyone in Laspra,<sup>160</sup> etc. . . . , etc. . . . As for you, receive all my love as your son,

*Rafael*

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<sup>159</sup> *Ladreda*: José María Fernández Ladreda, the former mayor of Oviedo who had just been elected to represent the city in the Spanish legislature. He was a right-wing monarchist who would later collaborate with the Franco regime during and after the Spanish Civil War.

<sup>160</sup> *Laspra*: San Martín de Laspra, a small beach town north of Oviedo, with a parish church of the same name.

## II. Journey to La Trapa

### *Rafael's discernment of his call to a monastic vocation, 1930–1934*

These letters trace Rafael's pursuit of the monastic life during his studies at the Higher Technical School of Architecture of Madrid. While his desire to serve God was clear from the beginning, his specific call to Cistercian monastic life began at his painter's easel.

In 1930, Rafael's uncle Leopoldo Barón commissioned his nephew to paint the cover for a book he had recently translated: the biography of Gabriel Mossier, a French soldier turned Trappist monk.<sup>161</sup> Over the course of the project, Rafael found himself captivated by the way of life Mossier described. On September 30 of that year, he visited the Trappist Monastery of San Isidro de Dueñas ("La Trapa") to see it for himself.<sup>162</sup> It was his first visit to the monastery that would become his home, and his romantic impressions of monastic austerity contrasted intensely with what he perceived to be his own worldliness:

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<sup>161</sup> Juan Antonio Martínez Camino, *Mi Rafael: el Beato Rafael Arnáiz, según el Padre Teófilo Sandoval, su confesor, intérprete y editor* (Bilbao: Desclée de Brouwer, 2003), 54. For the book on Gabriel Mossier, see Dom Antoine de Bourg, *Del campo de batalla a la trapa: El hermano Gabriel* (Madrid: Librería Religiosa Hernández, 1931).

<sup>162</sup> Gonzalo María Fernández, *God Alone: A Spiritual Biography of Blessed Rafael Arnáiz Barón*, trans. Hugh McCaffery (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2009), 9.

I have been feeling deeply ashamed of myself. Trappist monks wear coarse black wool, rough and stiff. They put it on when they profess and they are shrouded in it when they die . . . In my room, I see my silk neckties hanging up . . . a serious cause for reflection, and at the same time a trifle, one that makes me blush, realizing that one can hide such foolish vanity in a ridiculous piece of cloth.<sup>163</sup>

Having visited La Trapa for the first time just a few weeks after moving to Madrid, he waited two years before returning, making a retreat there from July 17–26, 1932. In addition to his monastic discernment, Rafael’s studies were further interrupted by his obligatory military service in the Spanish Army Corps of Engineers from January 25–July 26, 1933. Ultimately, despite his great trepidation at the sadness his departure would cause his family, Rafael requested entrance into La Trapa on November 33, 1933. Writing to the abbot, Dom Félix Alonso García, for his permission, he reflected, “I am not motivated to change my life in this way because of sadness or suffering or disappointment or disillusionment with the world . . . I have all that it can give me.”<sup>164</sup>

Telling only his best friend, Juan Vallaura, that he wouldn’t be returning to school after the holidays, Rafael left Madrid for his parents’ home in Oviedo in December 1933 convinced that he was truly following God’s call. At the same time, his heart was heavy with anxiety about revealing his plans to his parents, especially at Christmas.

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<sup>163</sup> Manuscript 12, *Impressions of La Trapa*.

<sup>164</sup> Letter 13.

I am already halfway there; what remains, as you know . . . is my parents. It is true that I have left behind the big dream of my degree, as well as the sincere affection of many people. To tell you the truth, it hasn't been that difficult, for two very simple reasons. First, the consideration that my sacrifice is pleasing in the eyes of God, who shall repay me in a way that people generally cannot understand, but that I can perceive from within my wretchedness. And second, because for a long time now my spirit has been growing more detached from things and closer to God. As I see this moment approaching, I am flooded with joy; and I am confident that God will continue giving me that joy, thus untying those knots of care and affection with which all creatures are tethered to the earth.<sup>165</sup>

After finally telling his parents the truth, Rafael was relieved to receive their full support alongside their natural sadness. He would enter the novitiate at La Trapa on January 16, 1934, leaving his worldly identity behind for good—or so he thought.

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<sup>165</sup> Letter 15.

**10. to Leopoldo Barón<sup>166</sup>**

Oviedo, October 11, 1930<sup>167</sup>

Dearest Uncle Polín,

I could have written you earlier, but I've been on the move constantly these past few days. Now that I am at home and at ease, with my student life starting to return to normal and my spirit starting to calm down, I am taking this opportunity to trouble you with these lines.

What do you want me to tell you? What I saw and experienced in La Trapa,<sup>168</sup> the impression that this holy monastery made on me, cannot be explained. Or at least, I don't know how to explain it, only God does.

In any case, I will give you an account of what I did and saw.

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<sup>166</sup> Leopoldo Barón Torres, maternal uncle, became Duke of Maqueda through marriage. Known to Rafael by his nickname, *Polín*, he had a strong influence on his nephew's vocation.

<sup>167</sup> Rafael is 19 years old in Letters 5 and 6.

<sup>168</sup> *La Trapa*: Refers throughout to the Cistercian Abbey of San Isidro (Abadía Cisterciense de San Isidro) in Dueñas, Palencia, Spain. Its popular nickname of "La Trapa" originates from the Monastery of La Trappe in France; from that monastery emerged the Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance, better known as the Trappists, to which the monks at San Isidro belong.

You left me on the train with Aunt María's relative, to whom I paid no attention, for when I told him that I was going to La Trapa he was very startled and left me in peace.<sup>169</sup>

I arrived at the station in a suffocating heat. I left my things with the baggage master; with my coat, my hand luggage, and much excitement, I took to the road, without speaking to anyone. It is three kilometers away, and I thought I would never arrive. How the sun beat down! A few meters short of the convent door, I stopped at a stream by the side of the road and cooled myself off.<sup>170</sup> Once I was rested I called the gatehouse, and out came a most obliging brother to whom I gave your letter for Father Armando.<sup>171</sup> He brought me to a small room that was in the gatehouse, where it appeared that Brother Bartolomé—that's the name of the porter—had been sewing at the window, since there were needles, bobbins, and everything else one might need. Then he had me go up to a little room in the guesthouse where I waited for Father Armando, who treated me far

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<sup>169</sup> *Aunt María*: María del Socorro Osorio de Moscoso y Reynoso, Duchess of Maqueda.

<sup>170</sup> *Convent*: While today this term is commonly used for communities of women religious, historically it has more often been applied to communities of men. Rafael uses the terms “monastery” (*monasterio*) and “convent” (*convento*) interchangeably in reference to La Trapa.

<sup>171</sup> *A most obliging brother*: Brother Bartolomé Aparicio Pérez was the porter in September 1930 when Rafael visited for the first time. *Father Armando*: Father Armando Regolf Santcher.

better than I deserve. I told him what you already know; one can see that he loves you very much. I expressed to him my desire to remain a few hours in the monastery.

From this moment I began to see clearly and became intimately ashamed of myself: when upon entering the church to greet the Lord, I saw the monks chanting in the choir, and that altar with that Virgin; I saw the respect that the monks have in church and, most of all, I heard a *Salve* that . . . dear Uncle Polín, only God knows what I felt . . . I did not know how to pray before.<sup>172</sup>

At eleven o'clock at night I got up, got dressed, and went down to the church, thinking that it was two in the morning. Then at four Father Armando said Mass for me, and I assisted him.

I saw, of course, the whole convent. And Father Abbot, and Brother Carmelo, who was not in the tailor shop because he was sick.<sup>173</sup> I gave him a hug, and he told me through signs to give you one in return.<sup>174</sup> I saw it all. You already know it better than I do, and so I cannot tell you anything new. At eight, a car passed by on the road headed to

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<sup>172</sup> *Salve*: The “*Salve Regina*,” or “Hail Holy Queen,” is a hymn to Mary, regularly sung after Compline in Cistercian houses.

<sup>173</sup> *Father Abbot*: Dom Félix Alonso García was the abbot of San Isidro de Dueñas at this time. In the Western church, the title of abbot is used for male monastic superiors, whom Cistercians address using the appellation “Dom.” *Brother Carmelo*: Brother Carmelo Mansuelo de Santiago.

<sup>174</sup> *Through signs*: The practice of communication through simple hand signing has a long history in the Cistercian order, and the monastic tradition more broadly.



the station. God, who is so good, wanted me to miss it, and I had to stay all morning until two in the afternoon.

Then I went into the field. I saw the monks with their big hats, working in the sun. If you saw how small they seem on those plains, so vast, with so much sky, and yet, in the eyes of God, it must seem quite different. And don't think that upon seeing and admiring them I felt envy, no, for you have taught me something very important that I have heard you say many times: that one may go toward God on many paths and in very different ways. Some fly, others walk, and others, most people, stumble. And since God wants it that way, then so do I.

Finally I had to leave the monastery, and I took to the road again on foot. I was not sad when I left, but I do intend to return, and to return for a few days.

You cannot fully comprehend my joy at La Trapa, but if you know them and you know me, you can begin to imagine it. I will remember that day my whole life, and at moments when I lose heart, I remember my brothers, their monastery, and their customs, and I am very much encouraged.

When I arrived at the station, dealing with men after having been among angels—it produced a certain disgust in me, to be frank with you. When I saw the train arriving in all its imposing grandiosity, I wanted to throw away my luggage and return to La Trapa.

Father Armando told me that not now, but when I finish my degree, they will need me. In short, may it be as God wills. And may He forgive us all when, as you say, we try to “put Him right” and think that we know better than He does what is best for us . . . when what we should do is leave ourselves in His hands and, of course, do all that we can on our part while He takes care of the rest.

Fr. Armando told me that he would not be at the convent in November, since he has to go direct a retreat elsewhere, so if you want to see him you need to go now, in October, or in December. And when you go, if possible, remember me while you are there, greet Father Armando and Brother Bartolomé for me. And again, only if possible—because that day I did not remember anything or anyone.

You were right when you said that I would thank you for this visit; how right you were. I will never be able to thank you enough, or Aunt María either, for what you have done for me. For while it is true that we must put up with one another's frailties and weaknesses, you had no obligation to put up with me for four months. And I realize that at times I must have been tiresome or impertinent, for which I hope you will be able to forgive me.

Afterward, in Burgos with Uncle Álvaro, I was very happy and he would not let me leave, so much so that I have been in Oviedo with my parents, brothers, and sister only four days.<sup>175</sup>

I received the trunk. I forgot about your books; if it is no trouble please send them whenever you like, since my father wants to give them to the Catholic Action library, and

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<sup>175</sup> *Uncle Álvaro*: Don Álvaro Barón Torres, Rafael's maternal uncle

if we had them here I would not ask you for them.<sup>176</sup> Now I will dedicate myself to *ruminating*<sup>177</sup> over them a little at a time.

I am sending you some holy cards from Father Aramburu, who is very elderly, but remembered me well and recognized me, though he can hardly see and cannot write.<sup>178</sup>

I am also sending you greetings and hugs from everyone. I have already started my university classes, and on Monday I start drawing classes.

We are going to found a chapter of Los Luises at the Jesuit rectory.<sup>179</sup>

And I have nothing else to tell you, other than that it has been raining all morning and I hope it will stay that way all day.

My parents, brothers, and sister are eagerly awaiting me. If you write me sometime, tell me all the news, you know I will thank you for it.

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<sup>176</sup> *Catholic Action (Acción Católica)*: an association of lay Catholics that began in response to anticlerical regimes across Europe in the nineteenth century and developed into groups with a variety of missions, from local parish evangelization to nationwide social democratic movements.

<sup>177</sup> Emphasis in the original throughout, unless otherwise stated.

<sup>178</sup> *Father Aramburu*: Father Ignacio María Aramburu, S.J. (1852–1935), one of Rafael's former schoolteachers at Colegio de la Merced in Burgos.

<sup>179</sup> *Los Luises*: A confraternity of university students, formally named the Congregation of Our Lady of Good Counsel and Saint Louis Gonzaga (*La Congregación de Nuestra Señora del Buen Consejo y San Luis Gonzaga*). Better known by their nickname, Los Luises were an apostolate of the Jesuit fathers in Spain.

When are you going to Madrid? What are my cousins up to? Has Aunt María gone on the Exercises? . . . Did the tractor arrive? . . . And whatever else you think of. If you tell me, you will give me great joy, which God will return to you.

Tomorrow, the 12th, is the feast of Our Lady of the Pillar.<sup>180</sup> I do not know if that is Pilar's name day, but just in case, give her a hug from me, and the same to her brothers and sisters.<sup>181</sup>

And tell Polín<sup>182</sup> to remember that he has my address written down, so he should not forget to send me a few lines.

Do not laugh at my letter, for though it be poorly written and may say many silly things, good will and a little affection can make up for all its faults. Since I want to tell you all many things, and I have few words for them, everything comes out all tangled, and sometimes it does not make any sense. Especially my thoughts about La Trapa, of which I have enough to go on about them for many days.

Fr. Armando told me that I ought not to come during the winter since I would have a difficult time with the cold, so I will go next year around this time, when no one

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<sup>180</sup> *Our Lady of the Pillar*: The title of Our Lady of the Pillar (*La Virgen del Pilar*) refers to the apparition of Mary to Saint James while he was preaching in Zaragoza, now part of Spain and home to her major shrine.

<sup>181</sup> *Pilar*: Rafael's cousin, the daughter of Leopoldo Barón and María Osorio.

<sup>182</sup> *Polín*: Rafael's cousin, the son of Leopoldo Barón and María Osorio, his father's namesake.

else is around, to spend at least eight days there. This time only two priests and I were there.

Fr. Armando gave me a little book<sup>183</sup> about Cistercian life, and a life of Father Marie Éphrem,<sup>184</sup> a Trappist; if you don't have them, don't hesitate to ask Father Armando for them, you'll like them.

What moved me most was the *Salve* at dusk before bed. If we don't sing it like that at Pedrosillo next year, I'm not coming.<sup>185</sup> It was sublime. Singing as they sing, with that fervor, it is impossible that the Virgin could not be pleased with them or would fail to give them all sorts of blessings . . . They are all so content and joyful, not a sad face to be seen, quite the opposite, and time flies for them. Brother Bartolomé told me he had been in the convent for twenty years and felt as if he had entered yesterday.

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<sup>183</sup> *A little book*: Anonymous, *La vida cisterciense en el monasterio de San Isidro de Dueñas* (Burgos: Tipografía de «El Monte Carmelo», 1923). This book, printed for the monastery's particular use, is an extract of a work by Dom Vital Ledohey, abbot of Bricquebec, France, from 1895–1929. That longer work was later translated into English as *A Spiritual Directory for Religious* (Trappist, KY: Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani, 1946).

<sup>184</sup> Anonymous, *The Life of Father Maria Ephraim* (Philadelphia: H. & C. McGrath, 1856).

<sup>185</sup> *Pedrosillo*: Leopoldo Barón and María Osorio's residence near Ávila.

Have you noticed the Virgin? The austerity of the main altar? Without rugs or flowers, only six candles and a cross: it is truly a Cistercian altar, where the tabernacle reigns above all.

While an older priest celebrated the conventual Mass, I heard the bells, up above the church there, deep and deliberate, the stillness of the monks, the soft, gentle light of the church, so that when it was time for the elevation, one would have needed to have such little faith to . . . I cannot explain it. When one feels a somewhat tender emotion, or when the soul feels something supernatural, trying to express it in words becomes somewhat grotesque. I think that in order to speak of God in certain ways, human language is very poor and spoils everything, or at least it cannot render the true meaning.

I assure you, I do not know what I am saying. If I say something ridiculous, I promise it is with the best of intentions.

If you have been patient enough to read up to this point, give Father Justo<sup>186</sup> my best if you see him sometime.

Hugs and kisses to my cousins, to Aunt María, and to you—I do not think I need to say it so many times; I am sending you all my affection and gratitude.

*Rafael*

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<sup>186</sup> *Father Justo*: Don Justo Sánchez Muñoz (1879–1951), a priest who was good friends with Rafael's aunt and uncle for many years and their official chaplain in their positions as Duchess and Duke of Maqueda.

11. to María Osorio<sup>187</sup>

Oviedo, March 15, 1931

Dearest Aunt María,

I do not ask your forgiveness for not having written you sooner, but rather I ask it of Him to whom I am answerable for my great laziness. I hope, with His help and what little willpower I have, to correct this odious fault of mine. I do not ask your forgiveness because among those who are truly brothers and sisters, forgiveness is granted without being asked.

I have nothing to say that could be of interest to you, as my life goes on in the utmost peace of both spirit and body, always trying to be better and to *improve* what I can in those around me. Perhaps I am mistaken and they are better than I am, for at times I am very vain and proud, and in God's eyes I may not be a publican, but rather a Pharisee . . . How weak we are . . . But no, with his help I cast aside those moments of weakness and discouragement completely, and every day I am more content with this life that offers me a thousand reasons and occasions to praise God.

Most of all, I greatly enjoy knowing and seeing more clearly every day, and in my eagerness to teach everyone around me and guide them toward that light, sometimes . . . I go too far. That is sad, but what would you say if, one time, while going for a walk, you happened upon an enormous valley with splendid views, fertile soil, sun, flowers, all sorts of plants—that is, a landscape that the human mind can barely imagine, of which

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<sup>187</sup> María Osorio was Rafael's aunt, married to Leopoldo Barón; see Letter 5, note 4.

you had only seen one little nook or corner? If you realized what a marvelous treasure you had found, what would you do? Well, the most logical thing to do would be to tell the whole world, all your friends, your family—in a word, anyone who will listen—and to try to guide them toward that paradise, explain to them what you have seen, and aim to convince them to go there. I think that is what anyone would do, anyone who is not the least bit selfish. But well, if after you had explained all that to them, they were to say to you, “Everything you’re saying is great, but in order to get there I would have to climb and clamber and make an effort, and honestly, I don’t think it’s all that you’re making it out to be . . . besides, not everyone can go there . . .”

That is quite sad if you are making an effort to show others the way, the simplest and easiest way as I see it, for all you have to do is keep going, never stopping no matter what surprises you encounter, remembering that what you seek is waiting for you at the end with open arms.

I hope, with my little experience, to follow in this way and to bring many people along with me. For if our Lord made use of twelve fishermen to convert the whole world, so too will he help me with this good desire; sometimes God makes use of the most insignificant things to touch a man’s heart.

Do not think me disheartened—on the contrary, I have made much progress in this task, which is of course an unending one.

The worst part, you know, is that I am the one who is most in need. Preaching is very simple; the hard thing is to practice what one preaches, and by divine will, I am by no means a saint, but a mere creature with a few sparks of fervor.



If you think of your nephew sometime, pray for him, since your prayers reach Him better than mine do, and pray for my intentions.

Since it was you who began this work, do not abandon it. . . . How good you are. I will never be able to repay you for what you have made of me . . . Luckily, I am not the one destined to give you the recompense you deserve. God will reward you.

What I really miss is someone to talk to about all this, but God has a different plan for me. He does not want to give me any friends, so I have to walk with Him alone, which is much better, for *true* loneliness is sad, whereas the solitude of one who is with God is not sad at all.

Forgive me for all this foolishness. When I sit down to write and say many silly things in such a short time, perhaps that is what I get for talking to fools and lunatics.

Papá, who has a heart of gold, bought me a wonderful missal with vespers the other day.<sup>188</sup>

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<sup>188</sup> *Papá*: Rafael Arnaiz Sánchez de la Campa, Rafael's father

I am reading and rereading Uncle Polín's books, and I like them more every day. I rather feel like asking him to send me the last one he wrote.<sup>189</sup> Tell him not to forget that he promised to send me the biography of Father Doyle.<sup>190</sup>

Truth be told I do nothing but ask for things. I am exceedingly eager for summer to arrive so that I can see you all again and embrace you, for as much as I may regret it my heart is still very much bound to this earth. You know that your nephew truly loves you.

Give my cousins many hugs, and as for you, receive all the affection you wish from your nephew

*Rafael*

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<sup>189</sup> *The last one he wrote*: His uncle translated the biography of French soldier turned Trappist monk Gabriel Mossier: Dom Antoine de Bourg, *Del campo de batalla a la trapa: El hermano Gabriel* (Madrid: Librería Religiosa Hernández, 1931). Rafael painted the cover, which inspired him to make his first visit to La Trapa; see Antonio María Martín Fernández-Gallardo, *San Rafael Arnáiz Barón: Vida y mensaje* (Madrid: Edibesa, 2009), 38.

<sup>190</sup> Alfred O'Rahilly, *Father William Doyle, S.J.* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1922). The Spanish edition was translated by Aurelio Ubierna (Ávila: Imp. Casa Social Católica, 1929).

Send me news of the matter regarding Uncle Álvaro.<sup>191</sup> Mamá will write you all when she has resolved the question of the Chaplaincy.<sup>192</sup>

Send me whatever news you have of my grandmother, too.<sup>193</sup>

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<sup>191</sup> *Uncle Álvaro*: Álvaro Barón Torres

<sup>192</sup> *Mamá*: Mercedes Barón Torres, Rafael's mother

<sup>193</sup> *My grandmother*: Doña Fernanda Torres Erro, maternal grandmother

## 12. Impressions of La Trapa

September 1931<sup>194</sup>

In La Trapa, the Rule is arranged so wisely that while the monks must struggle against cold, hunger, and fatigue . . . it doesn't kill them.<sup>195</sup>

Everything goes so well when everything is done for the love of God.

I met with a wise and happy man, the porter of La Trapa.<sup>196</sup> He told me, “True happiness is found in God, and only in Him; and true wisdom lies in recognizing Him as Master and Lord of all creation.”

I am convinced . . . whoever seeks God finds Him.<sup>197</sup>

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<sup>194</sup> Rafael was 20 years old when he wrote these notes, which he copied into the end of a notebook that he filled with quotes from saints and scripture, pasted-in holy cards, and illustrations (Juan Antonio Martínez Camino, *Mi Rafael: el Beato Rafael Arnáiz, según el Padre Teófilo Sandoval, su confesor, intérprete y editor* [Bilbao: Desclée de Brouwer, 2003], 156–157).

<sup>195</sup> *The Rule*: The Trappists follow the Rule of Saint Benedict, a model for living in monastic community written by Saint Benedict of Nursia in the sixth century. All further references will use the abbreviation RB and cite the following edition: *RB 1980: The Rule of Saint Benedict in English*, ed. Timothy Fry (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2019).

<sup>196</sup> *The porter of La Trapa*: Rafael may have been referring either to Brother Justo García Hidalgo or to Father Buenaventura Ramos Caballero here.

<sup>197</sup> Matt 7:8.

You hear many bells at the monastery. Some are high pitched and crystal clear, like the one at the guesthouse; others musical, like those of the clocks that sing in the cloisters; others are strong and vibrant, like those that call the monks to the refectory and the chapterhouse . . . And finally, the deep resounding tower bells that sound only for church services, or to call the monks to the choir to pray . . . Bells ring in the convent all day and night . . . A monk said to me, “Bells in the cloister do not bother us, on the contrary: whether they sound in the silence of the night or when we are working, the bells console us and seem to speak to us.” . . . A bell in a silent monastery is the voice of God.

I have been feeling deeply ashamed of myself. Trappist monks wear coarse black wool, rough and stiff. They put it on when they profess and they are shrouded in it when they die<sup>198</sup> . . . In my room, I see my silk neckties hanging up . . . a serious cause for reflection, and at the same time a trifle, one that makes me blush, realizing that one can hide such foolish vanity in a ridiculous piece of cloth.

People say that the silence of the monastery is sad, and hard to maintain under the Rule<sup>199</sup> . . . Nothing could be more wrong than such an opinion . . . The silence of La Trapa is the most cheerful celebration imaginable . . . Oh! If God let us see into the heart of another, then we would see within the soul of a Trappist—who looks miserable on the outside and lives in silence—a glorious song of jubilation bursting forth constantly and

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<sup>198</sup> *When they profess*: Trappists are first clothed with the white religious habit when they enter the novitiate and receive a black scapular when they first profess religious vows.

<sup>199</sup> “Monks should diligently cultivate silence at all times, but especially at night” (RB 42.1).

abundantly, full of love and joy, for his Creator, his God, his loving Father who cares for him and consoles him . . . The silence of the monastery is not sad, quite the opposite; one could say that there is nothing more joyful than the silence of a Trappist.

It is six in the morning . . . It is very cold and rainy . . . From the window in my room I can see a line of monks leaving through the convent gate in silence, carrying shovels, picks, and hoes as they go to work . . . They head out with their hoods up and wearing durable work boots, like the ones used by farmers around here . . . Raindrops fall upon the monks like bullets . . . They are going to work far away from the convent . . . On the road, they come across a luxurious automobile, which slows down upon seeing the strange retinue . . . But the monks take no notice. They cross and keep walking.

The occupants of the car, startled, contemplate them with curiosity. Once their surprise has dissipated, the noise of the engine makes itself heard once again in a violent start, launching the vehicle back onto the paved road at full speed . . . The incident has no great importance of itself, each goes his own way, that's all . . . But looking closely, what different paths men take through this life! . . . On the one hand, the man running at high speed does not pause for even a moment to think or reflect, because all the baggage he carries around this world hinders and overwhelms him . . . Always, always running at high speed down a paved road . . . And on the other, a few men are going in the opposite direction, in silence and on foot, letting the raindrops soak their clothes, not looking at what happens around them; for they have mapped out a straight path and want to reach its end without stumbling, and so they cannot stop . . .

Lord! You descended to the Virgin's womb and let Yourself be crucified for all humanity . . . For everyone, without distinction. And yet how differently they repay You.

And from the window in my room this morning, I could see that contrast clearly, and with it a rather strange reality. In the world, since everyone speaks at once, no one can understand one another, and they can only hear the noise of an engine, whereas here, no one speaks, and they understand one another so well! But the explanation is rather obvious: the former speak to the world in shouts, and the latter speak to God in silence.

How well they understand one another. How quickly, upon contemplating the Trappists, the Savior's divine words in the Sermon on the Mount come to one's soul: *Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.*<sup>200</sup>

Nobody prays to the Virgin Mary as Trappists do. Such tenderness and affection our Mother must have for them, for her sons who venerate her with such love. I think that in heaven, the souls of Trappists form a crown for the Virgin Mary, and with infinite exaltation, they never cease to repeat the words of our father Saint Bernard, who, in a moment of ardent love for his Mother, once exclaimed, "*O clemens, o pia, o dulcis Virgo Maria!*"<sup>201</sup>

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<sup>200</sup> Matt 5:5

<sup>201</sup> *O clemens, o pia, o dulcis Virgo Maria*: Translating to "O clement, o loving, o sweet Virgin Mary," this is the final line of the Latin hymn "Salve Regina" ("Hail Holy Queen"); see Letter 5. While the hymn's composition is generally credited to 11<sup>th</sup>-century monk Bl. Hermann of Reichenau, this final invocation is traditionally attributed to Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, founder of the Trappist-Cistercian monastic tradition.

When Trappists are at prayer, for a moment they cease to be men of earth and become true angels who, much like those in heaven, do nothing more than praise God: He who is thrice Mighty, thrice Immortal, and thrice Holy.<sup>202</sup>

At certain moments in a Trappist's prayer, God our Lord, in his infinite goodness, cannot help but descend to the Choir where his sons are singing and take pity on them—when, hearts repentant of their sins and faces cast toward the earth, their low, measured voices let forth that exclamation that I have heard so many times, but never before as at La Trapa: “*Kyrie eleison, Christe eleison, Kyrie eleison.*”<sup>203</sup>

The Trappists who have been ordained *in sacris*<sup>204</sup> sing the Divine Office<sup>205</sup> day and night, that liturgical song of the Church, its ultimate prayer. The prayers of their

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<sup>202</sup> *Thrice Mighty, Thrice Immortal, Thrice Holy*: a reference to the Trisagion (“Holy God, Holy Mighty, Holy Immortal, have mercy on us”), an ancient prayer of the universal Church generally recited in sets of three. In the Roman Rite, this prayer is primarily used in the liturgy for Good Friday, but it also forms part of the hour of Prime in certain monastic communities.

<sup>203</sup> *Kyrie eleison, Christe eleison, Kyrie eleison*: a Greek prayer forming part of the Roman Rite of the Mass, “Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy, Lord have mercy.”

<sup>204</sup> *In sacris*: Under holy orders, and therefore under the obligation to pray the Divine Office.

<sup>205</sup> *Divine Office*: Also known as the Liturgy of the Hours, the Divine Office is the prayer of the whole Church, structured around the psalms and offered at set times, or Hours, throughout the day. The canonical Hours include Vigils, Lauds, Prime, Terce, Sext,



brothers, the lay brothers,<sup>206</sup> consist in Our Fathers and Hail Marys in Latin, which in the course of the day rise up to heaven by the thousands . . . Humble offerings that must please God much more than many works that in the world are called charitable, and that nevertheless conceal such vanity and self-love. How much more worthy in the eyes of God is one Hail Mary offered from the heart than the greatest deed done without pure love for God.

The Trappist lives in God and for God, who is his only reason to exist in the world . . . How different they are from certain souls who call themselves Christian, yet treat God as if he were of no consequence, merely someone to deal with at eight in the morning and leave behind at nine—until the next day at the same time, only to forget him again.

In speaking of Trappists, one compares them to other souls without wishing to . . . And it should not be like that, everyone offers what is given to them to offer and what has been entrusted to them by God. Comparisons—I was going to say that they are abhorrent. I will say, rather, that they are not charitable . . . But, nevertheless, the difference is such that one cannot help but fall into them. For setting aside the few little shining lights in

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None, Vespers, and Compline (see RB 16 and 17); for the schedule at San Isidro, see Letter 29.

<sup>206</sup> *Lay brothers*: At the time, Cistercian monasteries included three classes of community members: choir monks, who were ordained priests primarily dedicated to prayer in choir; lay brothers, who dedicated more time to work and had fewer obligations in choir; and oblates, who do not take monastic vows.

this world, one could say that it is ruled by darkness; whereas here in La Trapa, it is never night and it is always day.

Every day hundreds of poor people come to the gate to ask for food, which is never denied them.<sup>207</sup> That does not stop them from breaking the brothers' windows from time to time.

The conventual Mass at the monastery is at ten in the morning, and it is celebrated with such devotion, and heard by the monks with such profound respect, that a man of little faith can only lower his head and exclaim, "Lord, Lord!" How many times have I attended the divine Sacrifice with my soul absent . . . Forgive me, Lord, I knew not what I was doing; in my littleness and wretchedness, I will never come to understand the immense love of a God who humbles himself to come down among his creatures only to be mistreated or to go unnoticed . . . But one cannot say this of a Cistercian monastery. The monks attend the divine Sacrifice not just with their bodies but with their souls . . . Everything is respect, everything shows veneration and love for their God.

The smallest details in the liturgy can escape the most stringent academics, but not a Trappist, precisely because he lives it . . . No little bells ring during the Mass, nor

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<sup>207</sup> In fact, hundreds of poor citizens who lived on the outskirts of Palencia depended on San Isidro for their daily meals—and particularly for bread. Food shortages were exacerbated during the war, which officially began in 1936, as bread and other staples were rationed. After the war, Franco banned the monastery from distributing food, for fear that photographs of long lines stretching down the road would be used as evidence against his government (OC 83).

can anything be heard other than the monks' slow and deliberate chanting and the priest's prayers . . . And when coming to the Canon,<sup>208</sup> a Trappist gets up and rings the tower bells so that the lay brothers, who are going about their work in the fields, might leave their tools behind for a moment. Lifting their eyes to heaven, they give thanks to God, for in those moments the great mystery that astonishes the soul is being prepared . . . The God of all creation is coming down into the world to be sacrificed, and to take refuge in the soul of a Trappist.

Nevertheless, let us not be fooled by our senses, which tend to be deceptive . . . Far beyond all the little details that impress a visitor, there is a certain something, a certain mystery that cannot be expressed in words and cannot be understood without faith . . . As such, in La Trapa the common saying comes to pass: "Many look, but only a few see" . . . La Trapa and the life of its monks may be moving to an artist, or to anyone who possesses a high degree of sensitivity, as they may be moved by a painting or a sonata . . .

But a Christian who has faith sees something more than that in La Trapa . . . He sees God clearly . . . He comes away edified in the faith, and if the Lord gives him the grace, he comes away knowing himself a little better . . . And there, alone with God and his conscience, he begins to change his way of thinking, his way of feeling, and most important, his way of acting in the world.

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<sup>208</sup> *Canon*: in the Roman Rite, the "Canon of the Mass" refers to the Eucharistic Prayer.

**13. to Dom Félix Alonso García<sup>209</sup>**

Ávila, November 19, 1933

Reverend Father,

I don't know if you will remember me, for it has been some time, about three years,<sup>210</sup> since I was last able to spend a few days at La Trapa. Even so, since that time, the Lord our God has been working within me in such a way that He has formed in me the firm intention to give myself to Him with all my heart and body and soul, and in order to fulfill my intention and resolution, and moreover, trusting in God's help, it is my desire to enter the Cistercian Order. This is, in short, my Reverend Father, the reason that I am requesting an interview with you as soon as possible, so that your reverence might lend me your help and counsel.

I believe that I can rely on God, and in Him alone I trust, but as I take my first steps, I also trust in the charity of your reverence, whom I already regard as a father, and whom I beg to admit me as his son.

I am in Ávila with my aunt and uncle, awaiting your reply with the natural anxiety of one who wishes to give everything to God.

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<sup>209</sup> Dom Félix Alonso García was the abbot of the monastery of San Isidro de Dueñas.

<sup>210</sup> Rafael refers to the three years that had passed since his first visit to La Trapa, in September 1930, but he had in fact been to the monastery since then. He had done the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises there from June 17–26, 1932 (OC 88).

On the other hand, I have only to add that I am not motivated to change my life in this way because of sadness or suffering or disappointment or disillusionment with the world . . . I have all that it can give me. God, in His infinite goodness, has given me such gifts in this life, many more than I deserve . . . As such, my reverend Father, if you receive me into your community alongside your sons, be assured that you will be receiving only a heart filled with joy and much love for God.

Awaiting your reply, and humbly asking your blessing, your son in Jesus and Mary,

*Rafael Arnáiz*

c/o San Juan de la Cruz 4, Ávila<sup>211</sup>

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<sup>211</sup> The novice master, Father Marcelo León Fernández, responded to this letter on November 21, inviting Rafael to an interview. Rafael came to the Monastery on the 24th, stayed the night, and returned to Ávila on the 25th having been admitted to the novitiate.

#### 14. Dedication of a holy card to Leopoldo Barón

Ávila, November 22, 1933

A great many Tabernacles exist across the face of the earth, but there is only one God, who is our eucharistic Lord: a consoling truth that unites the monk in his choir, the missionary among unbelievers, and the priest in his parish. There is neither distance in space nor in time . . . at the foot of the Tabernacle we are all near; God unites us. Let us ask Him, through Mary's intercession, that one day in heaven we might contemplate this God who, for love of humanity, hides Himself under the species of bread and wine. May it be so.

*Rafael*

15. to Fr. Marcelo León<sup>212</sup>

Ávila, December 3, 1933

My dear Master,

Since I left the abbey, my spirit has not ceased to be among my monastic brothers for even a moment, although I have had to attend to all the business that I left unfinished in Madrid—all of which is now, thanks be to God, resolved. I will tell you what I have been up to since you saw me off.

I left Venta de Baños that Saturday, and spent Sunday and Monday in Ávila with my beloved aunt and uncle. On Tuesday I went to Madrid. If living in that city took a lot of effort and self-mortification before, the days I spent there now were relatively *easy*, seeing as—God willing—they shall be the last. Just remembering that the novices were surely praying for me has given me, and will continue to give me, the strength to follow in the way of the Lord, which of course is a cross, but a blessed cross when embraced for love of Christ.

Everything has been arranged. I said goodbye to my professors, my friends, and my family.<sup>213</sup> Of course, nobody knows that the trip I have planned will last my whole life, and I have left everyone under the impression that I will return in January after the

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<sup>212</sup> Fr. Marcelo León was the master of novices at San Isidro.

<sup>213</sup> *My family*: Rafael is referring to the family members he had in Madrid: the Fontanals-Barón family and the Marquess and Marchioness of San Miguel y Grox. See Letter 10.

holidays. So, nobody knows anything, except a friend of mine,<sup>214</sup> a classmate who is taking care of all my books and other things that seem so important to us as we go about the world, though in reality, understood rightly, they are nothing more than whims, luxuries, and little vanities.

I am already halfway there; what remains, as you know . . . is my parents. It is true that I have left behind the big dream of my degree, as well as the sincere affection of many people. To tell you the truth, it hasn't been that difficult, for two very simple reasons. First, the consideration that my sacrifice is pleasing in the eyes of God, who shall repay me in a way that people generally cannot understand, but that I can perceive from within my wretchedness. And second, because for a long time now my spirit has been growing more detached from things and closer to God. As I see this moment approaching, I am flooded with joy; and I am confident that God will continue giving me that joy, thus untying those knots of care and affection with which all creatures are tethered to the earth.

As I mentioned, Father, I spent the week in Madrid and yesterday, December 2, I came to Ávila, in order to leave from here for Oviedo to wage the final battle: my parents. I will likely leave around December 8 and I will be there for . . . well, Father, I don't know how long. Following your advice, I will prepare the way little by little, and when it seems prudent, I will ask God for strength—for me and for my parents—and I will ask their permission, and without further delay, the master of novices will have me digging up roots in Venta de Baños . . .

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<sup>214</sup> *A friend of mine*: His close friend and fellow boarder, Juan Vallauré. See Letter 9.



For now everything is in the hands of God and of the Blessed Virgin, to whom I must especially devote my affection and love, for She is to be my *only Mother* for what remains of my life.

How happy I am, Father, to know I am so loved by Our Lady, and how good God is with me, who treats me thus without my deserving it; at times I fear not knowing how to return His love, for my conduct has always been rather middling, and I have neither devotion nor mortification nor anything that really distinguishes me from others, and nevertheless, you see, my good God bestows upon me favors that I do not deserve . . . Mysteries of His will that make us think and reflect on many things . . . for truly, humanity deserved nothing, but still our Lord came down to be nailed to a cross . . . He gives us everything, and when we give Him a little bit, we call it a sacrifice; it seems to me the word is ill used in such a case . . .

When I do my *examen*<sup>215</sup> and look inside myself a little, I can see clearly that I do nothing more than follow the dictates of my heart toward God, eager to fill myself with Him and nothing more. The real sacrifice would be to remain tethered to the world, and not to be able to sing to Him day and night in choir . . .

Forgive me, Father, for having digressed so much in this letter. What I do ask of you is that you might do me the kindness of answering me before I go to Oviedo, telling me what you think of what I plan to do, and your opinion about what I have done; your counsel will be followed as if it were a commandment, for I already consider myself a

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<sup>215</sup> *Examen*: A daily examination of conscience as recommended by Saint Ignatius of Loyola.

novice. If you give me some encouragement, I will be grateful to you for it; and if you merely oblige me with a line or two saying that my letter arrived, I will be grateful for that too, for I do not wish to bother you more than necessary.

Give my kind regards to Father Abbot, and I ask your blessing and your prayers as your novice

*Rafael*

Write me here, at my aunt and uncle's house in Ávila, San Juan de la Cruz 4.

16. to Fernanda Torres<sup>216</sup>The King's<sup>217</sup> Ávila, December 7, 1933

My dearest grandmother,

Uncle Polín tells me that today is the anniversary of your wedding day; this is the first time that I've written you on this day, but better late than never. My grandfather<sup>218</sup> in heaven will be pleased that it is your oldest grandson who, after so many years, is wishing you joy on this day.

From the letters you write to Uncle Polín, I can see clearly that some of your days are full of sadness and gray thoughts, as you say. It is very true that you have been through a lot, and you still have something left to go through . . . but, *abuelita*, if you look up to heaven for a moment, you'll see that all you can do is give infinite thanks, for you may be satisfied that you have given the world a large Christian family that gives much glory to God.

I do not want to minimize your sorrows. What I do want is to see a heart that is joyful in the midst of all the dejection that people and illness can cause . . . It all amounts to child's play compared to the great Truth . . . the only Truth, who is God; and the knowledge that we are sustained by Him gives us the strength for many things, even

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<sup>216</sup> Fernanda Torres Erro was Rafael's maternal grandmother.

<sup>217</sup> *The King's Ávila*: In the recent general election of November 1933, four of Ávila's five legislative seats had gone to monarchist politicians.

<sup>218</sup> *My grandfather*: His maternal grandfather was named Álvaro Barón Cea-Bermúdez.

things that are considered heroic in the eyes of others, but as I am telling you, even those same heroic deeds are fun and games in the eyes of God . . . and very simple ones at that, you need only do one thing . . . which is to surrender yourself to Him in such a way that we have to contribute nothing more than our own good will . . .

I read somewhere, I don't know where, that *if you seek God, you will find Him*<sup>219</sup> . . . All that matters is seeking Him, and once you have found him, I promise you, *abuelita*, there will be no more pain, or joy, or anything else . . . there will be nothing but Him who fills and floods everything . . . And that is not a birthright for privileged souls, no. Every creature can find Him, but you must not search for Him among people and their affection, nor among material things and the world . . . neither will you find Him while looking for comfort and calm . . . To find Him, you must seek Him in the cross, in self-renunciation and sacrifice . . . That is when God reveals himself to us, and precludes us from seeing anything else, for He is so *absorbing* that there is no longer anything beyond Him.

Seize this moment, *abuela*, for God loves you so much in giving you a cross; so you are already well on your way, and need not look for one yourself.

Anyway, I'm writing you all these things that you already know, and they're inappropriate coming from your lowly grandson Rafael who has so much to learn from others, but the goodness of my desire ought to offset this little mystical-ascetic pedantry.

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<sup>219</sup> *If you seek God, you will find Him*: Among other biblical references, Matt 7:8: *everyone who searches finds*. The rhetorical flourish of introducing a well-known quote as if the author forgot its source is common in the New Testament (e.g., Hebrews 2:6, *someone has testified somewhere*). I owe this observation to Elizabeth Tyley.

I sound like a newly-hatched Dominican, taking his first steps toward a sermon . . .

Perhaps these are just quirks of youth.

These days, I'm finishing up my pleasant electoral holiday with my beloved aunt and uncle, and I'll be starting my Christmas holiday with my parents and brothers and sister . . . The truth is that with so much love on all sides and so many holidays . . . the cross I can offer to God is a little one, for I can assure you, *abuelita*, that I am completely happy . . . and the day that I make up my mind to seek God as I ought, it will cost me dearly, and I assure you that I am already quite impatient for it.

Well, nothing else for today. A great big hug from your grandson who is very much counting on your prayers,

*Rafael*

Don't say anything to Aunt María,<sup>220</sup> because honestly I can't think of anything to tell her . . . An affectionate, courteous greeting . . . for the sake of "what people might say" . . . but nothing else, from her nephew who has no affection for her, no, not at all

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<sup>220</sup> *Aunt María*: María Josefa Barón Torres, Rafael's maternal aunt, who lived with Fernanda.

## 17. to Fr. Marcelo León

Ávila, December 8, 1933

Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception

My dearest Father Master,<sup>221</sup>

I received great consolation from your charitable, caring letter, may God reward you. This letter is to tell you that on Sunday<sup>222</sup> I will leave Ávila for Venta de Baños, and I will arrive on the express train, just like the other day.

The holidays have begun, and my trip home approaches. The moment when I will tell my parents is frightening, because of circumstances that I want to explain to you myself, as I promised; for because of my own weakness, I see myself in grave danger, and in such moments, the only things I care about are God and my vocation. Therefore, I am coming to the monastery now so that you can counsel me, and to surrender myself entirely to the will of my superiors, which to me, in this case, represents the will of God.

Regarding my books, drawing tools, and work implements, yes, I left him<sup>223</sup> everything conditionally, thinking that if the community would find them useful, then

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<sup>221</sup> *Father Master*: A title used for the master of novices, a professed monk who is tasked with the spiritual formation of novices as they begin religious life. See Thomas Merton, *Monastic Observances: Initiation into the Monastic Tradition 5*, ed. Patrick F. O'Connell (Collegeville, MN: Cistercian Publications, 2010), 260.

<sup>222</sup> Rafael ended up leaving on Monday, December 11, rather than Sunday, December 10.

<sup>223</sup> *I left him everything*: Rafael's friend Juan Vallaure (see Letter 15).

tomorrow . . . although of course I am coming to the monastery *completely* alone . . . I suppose you will understand perfectly what I am trying to say. I will be useful to the community in all that is asked of me, but my interests will be left at the door . . . My only interest is God.

I will travel with a close friend<sup>224</sup> who will help me around my parents. Right now they are the only anxiety I have, since they are unaware of all this.

Today, on this feast of the Immaculate Conception, I am uniting myself spiritually with my brother novices, so that She might enlighten us all, and that through her intercession, our Lord God might gladly accept what I am going to offer him with all my heart.

Give my kind regards to Father Abbot, and as for you, my dear Father, I ask your prayers and your blessing as your novice<sup>225</sup>

*Rafael*

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<sup>224</sup> *A close friend*: Again, Juan Vallaure (see Letter 9).

<sup>225</sup> Rafael was not yet technically a novice, not yet having been clothed with the habit. However, he signed off as “your novice” here as a mark of respect for his novice master, whom he already considered an authority over him.

## 18. to Fernanda Torres

Ávila, December 10, 1933

My dearest *abuelita*,

Today Uncle Polín gave me your letter to read, and from it I can tell that, of course, you translated correctly. I did not intend for you to find out, for one rather simple reason: my parents don't know anything . . . And I *have been admitted* into La Trapa for fifteen days now. As you can imagine, I think only of the great favor that God has granted me, and I never cease to give Him thanks . . . I came to tell Uncle Polín about it the first time I came to Ávila; I went to Venta de Baños<sup>226</sup> . . . I am in correspondence with the master of novices, and tomorrow, Monday, I am going to La Trapa to get some advice, and then off to Oviedo to tell my parents who should be *the first* to know about it, and should hear it from me . . . It is a duty for me and a kindness that they deserve; so the only people in the family who know about it are you and Aunt María,<sup>227</sup> and my beloved Uncle Polín and Aunt María<sup>228</sup> . . . I must ask you, therefore, for absolute discretion, but

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<sup>226</sup> *I went to Venta de Baños*: Rafael is referring to his recent visit of November 24, 1933.

<sup>227</sup> *Aunt María*: Rafael's maternal aunt, María Josefa Barón Torres, who lived with Fernanda.

<sup>228</sup> *Uncle Polín and Aunt María*: Rafael's maternal uncle, Leopoldo Barón, and his wife María Osorio.



probably not for long, since my parents may find out as early as next week, as I will surely be in Oviedo by Wednesday.<sup>229</sup>

I know that the news did not catch you by surprise, and I hope it will not catch my parents by surprise either. For years now I have been thinking about it, and for years now God has been calling me, sweetly and gently. And so for me there is only one thing to do: go . . . Of course, in order to do that, I have to get up and destroy a lot of things . . . but such destruction is momentary . . . later, when the wounds have been healed and God has taken possession of us, the love that we seemed to leave behind at first will grow stronger and above all purer . . . that love is purified in God. Thus, with some in the world and others in the monastery choir, people come to identify with one another more and to love one another more, because true love is rooted in Christ and nourished by charity.

Don't think that I am going far away . . . on the contrary, I am going closer to God, and if through my prayers and sacrifices I can help others to grow closer to Him . . . what more could I ask, what more could I desire? . . . And so, I am not leaving behind the affection of my loved ones, which is very beautiful and very human . . . but rather I want to transform it into sublime, divine love.

My dear grandmother, what I do beg of you is that you ask God to give strength to my parents, and even more than strength, understanding. As for me, may God enlighten me and light my way in this endeavor, which seems heroic in the eyes of men, but in reality is nothing more than a way of returning the many benefits that the Lord has given me.

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<sup>229</sup> *Wednesday*: December 13, 1933.

And please, *never* tell anyone that I told you before my parents . . . Things turned out that way, blessed be God, but that was not my intention.

Praise God, *abuelita*, praise Him at all times,<sup>230</sup> even when sorrows imprison us, even when our hearts are torn open, even when desolation overpowers us. Praise God at all times, there is no other prayer that God appreciates more, nor is there any other prayer that brings us closer to Him. That prayer will soon become my life . . . A life that will be spent in the choir, at work, and in silence, and that can be reduced to just one thing: praising God at all times.

Many things are coming to mind, and I would tell you those many things, but when love is true and deep, words express it poorly. Be content, then, with my silence, which perhaps you will understand better; after all, it is merely a foretaste of monastic silence.

My letter is not a farewell, either. Christians never bid one another farewell. God is our end, and there we will meet one another for all eternity . . . What do a few years matter, next to all that? Nothing, absolutely nothing . . . Impatience for our arrival makes them long, but God's help makes them short, so that they pass without our noticing. All we have to do is make good use of them, for there is only a little time to do good, and a long time to do evil.

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<sup>230</sup>See Ps 34:1: *I will bless the Lord at all times: his praise shall continually be in my mouth.*

Give Aunt María a big long hug for me. She already knows that the affection I have for her is real. As for you, *abuelita*, what do you want me to say? You already know what I am sending for you. I await only your blessing as your oldest grandchild

*Rafael*

**19. to Fr. Marcelo León**

Oviedo, December 17, 1933

My dear Father Master,

I should have written you days ago. Forgive my delay, but it is difficult to express the state of my soul in a letter; only God knows it, and I offer Him what I am going through these days. I am living in my parents' home, and right now they are completely happy to have me at their side . . . I still haven't said anything, because everything renders me defenseless: a show of affection here, a kindness from my mother there . . . but this situation is becoming unsustainable. On the other hand, I can't give the news a little bit at a time, because they haven't noticed anything different about me, since I have been thinking and acting this same way for a long time. That is, if I bring up La Trapa in conversation, it doesn't take them by surprise . . . because they're used to it by now. If I hint at any conversation about this topic, the same thing happens. They just think: that's Rafael for you . . . And so I have no choice but to give the news all of a sudden, just telling them that you are expecting me, and that I am leaving . . . and believe me, Father, I lack the strength to inflict the wound—though not on myself, for I am already bleeding from it . . .

Pray for me, dear Father, that God might sustain me in these difficult moments in which circumstances ordained by God have placed me. I am giving up everything, but I am doing it little by little, and every day, every hour that passes, every detail of my home life reminds me of that. It's as if I were about to undergo an operation, and with complete calm, even taking pleasure in it, I were to prepare the instruments and all the details

myself . . . And my very nature and my selfishness are shouting at me: “Enough already! . . . Enough!” Soon, then; I don’t know how long I can resist. When you have to operate, operate fast; if you have to cut open and wound, the sooner the better . . .

And it’s not that my vocation is in danger. On the contrary, I am more content every day with the path on which I have set out, and more resolved in everything. For me, God comes first, and with His help I will be able to overcome His creatures. If the only thing I can offer Him is a bloodied heart, it is because that is what He wanted, and He will take care of healing it, for it shall be all His.

I have such a desire, Father, to be among my brother novices and leave all this behind at once . . . I am writing you from a warm room, with rugs, good lighting, and my soft, clean bed; in a word, all the comfort and convenience that modern life can provide . . . But when I think of the dormitory<sup>231</sup> at La Trapa, I would trade it all for that, and a hundred times over.

Today I went to hear a sermon and receive Benediction at the Dominican convent,<sup>232</sup> and my mother, because it was a bit cold, insisted that I take the car, and if you knew how much I have reflected on and considered that detail . . . Anyway, Father, what’s the point of bothering you with all the details of my life? In short, what seemed of

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<sup>231</sup> *Dormitory*: Here Rafael uses the word *camarilla*, meaning a shared dormitory divided with partitions, as distinct from *celda*, meaning the standard individual monastic cell.

<sup>232</sup> *Dominican convent*: Convento de Santo Domingo in Oviedo, where the Dominican friars also have a chapel and a school.

no importance to me before is now affecting me very much, and if I could move to the monastery through thought alone, I would do it . . .

But God is asking me for my parents' sacrifice, as well as my own . . . then may it be done. I am counting not on my own strength, but on the help of God and the Blessed Virgin. It will all be done; to do otherwise would be cowardice.

Tell the novices not to be anxious for my arrival, but rather to pray that the Lord's will be done in me.

I await your letter eagerly, but I ask that you send it by way of *San Juan de la Cruz 4, Ávila*, at my aunt and uncle's house,<sup>233</sup> and they will take care of sending it to me without my parents finding out. Until now I have never kept any secrets from them, and so I haven't minded that they read the letters I receive, but now, as long as I haven't told them yet, I don't want . . . good Father, you understand.

I haven't done anything yet about the required documentation, not even finding out which Burgos parish I am confirmed and baptized in.<sup>234</sup>

Nothing more to tell you now; give my kind regards to Father Abbot, and I await your prayers and blessing as your novice

*Rafael*

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<sup>233</sup> *My aunt and uncle's house*: the Ávila residence of María Osorio and Leopoldo Barón.

<sup>234</sup> Rafael was baptized on April 21, 1911, in the parish of Santa Águeda, Burgos, and confirmed on December 1, 1913, at the Colegio del Niño Jesús (School of the Child Jesus), Burgos. Sacramental records are a typical requirement for an application to enter religious life.

Argüelles 39, Oviedo.<sup>235</sup>

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<sup>235</sup> *Argüelles 39*: The address of Rafael's parents' home in Oviedo, from which he sent this letter.

**20. to Leopoldo Barón**

Oviedo, December 17, 1933

Dearest Uncle Polín,

Just a quick note to ask you for a favor. You will undoubtedly receive a letter for me from my home in Venta de Baños;<sup>236</sup> I beg you to send it to me with a quick note from you so that my parents don't find out, because they still know absolutely nothing, and right now are completely happy to have me at their side.

These days I've been telling one lie after another; or rather, I've been hiding the truth. I don't know how long God will give me the strength to do it, but I'm telling you, in my current state, anything can render me defenseless: a show of affection, my mother's kindness, my father's excitement. I am making a mighty effort, since my body is at home with my family, while my spirit is ever further away.

How much God asks of me!!! For He not only asks me to leave everything behind, but also, before leaving it for good, He asks me to savor it. It is hard to undergo an operation, but still harder to have to prepare all the instruments oneself and even take pleasure in the preparations.

I don't think I have to explain any of this to you. You understand perfectly well, and you know that God will forgive me for all this rather human weakness.

My mother is playing the piano . . . I have to leave . . . If I keep quiet, I suffer greatly; if my joy brings joy to my parents, I suffer even more . . . How good God is,

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<sup>236</sup> *My home in Venta de Baños*: That is, the monastery.



Uncle Polín, who makes me suffer for His sake. For if it were not for Him, I would not have to tear my own heart out piece by piece, slowly, as I am now.

But look . . . let's leave the doing to Him. May His will be done in me.

Are you better now?

When I arrived at La Trapa the other day,<sup>237</sup> and I laid at the foot of the altar what I had just done in Ávila,<sup>238</sup> I was utterly content, believe me. When I left, I asked the Virgin to be with me, to accompany me and guide my steps . . . the last steps I would take among men . . . so when I falter, I remember Her, and as I know that She is waiting for me at the monastery, just thinking of Her gives me strength to carry on . . . and I carry on.

Listen, the novices were very happy the other day because they thought I was there to stay, and as we heard the high Mass, the one who rings the bell<sup>239</sup> brought me a bench. When he was returning from work, I crossed paths with them on the way, because I was heading out, and he smiled at me as if to say, “Let's see if you come back soon . . . and take courage, the Virgin is at your side . . .” And I'm telling you, just for the friendly smile of that bell-ringing novice at a stranger—when all he knew about me is that I am in

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<sup>237</sup> *The other day*: December 11, 1933, when Rafael met with the master of novices to ask for his advice about breaking the news to his parents.

<sup>238</sup> *What I had just done in Ávila*: Rafael requested permission to enter La Trapa by letter while he was staying with his aunt and uncle in Ávila.

<sup>239</sup> *The one who rings the bell*: Fray María Damián Yáñez Neira, who would become Rafael's co-novice and eventually one of his biographers.

the world, fighting to detach myself from it—just for that kindness alone, my trip to the monastery was worth it . . . I’m just telling you this, because only you understand me.

But anyway, I don’t want to go on rambling. If I were to start talking, I’d be up tonight until three in the morning, but since I don’t have anyone to talk to, I’ll share my thoughts in silence with God. He has taken that away from me, the consolation of others, so that I might seek Him alone and communicate with Him alone.

I am not asking for your prayers, or for Aunt María’s, because I know that you are both already offering them generously.

My dearest aunt and uncle . . . I have done you wrong by giving you so much only then to have to take it away from you.

There are so many things coming to mind now that I didn’t say to you, that my stupid tears kept me from saying, but there is so much I want to say to you, too much to say now. In heaven you will hear it all; for now, leave me alone. Then, upon finding myself alone, I will live more for God, and God will be more pleased with me.

Forgive me, I don’t know what I’m saying. I’d gladly take a glass of Cointreau; that would get rid of this lump in my throat that won’t let me swallow. Anyway, I’ll stop now because it’s now one in the morning and I’ve already got two letters here, one for you and the other for Father Master.<sup>240</sup> This is the only time I can use, when everyone is quiet and in bed, and tonight it seems that I’ve “let go of my inhibitions” while writing.

How’s it going with the crown? See, I’m paying attention to everything.

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<sup>240</sup> *Father Master*: a title used for the master of novices, Fr. Marcelo León (see Letter 17).

Don't worry about the money I left with you. One of these days my parents will write you.

Goodbye, my dearest aunt and uncle, and let us prepare ourselves, for beyond all these small matters that occupy us creatures, in six days the Savior of the world will come down to be born in a manger, in complete poverty, with the greatest vulnerability.

I wish you a Christmas season full of happiness with your children . . . As it is the feast of the Christian home, I will try not to spoil it for my parents and brothers and sister. If I don't spend the season as I have in the past, that is, *humanly* happy, spiritually I am even more so, for this is the first time in my twenty-two years that I have something worthy to offer the Child Jesus.

Sending you both a great big hug, your son,

*Rafael*

The day that I leave for good, I will write you, just as I promised. Take the novice master's letter out of its envelope, so you both can read it as you have every right to, but also so that it takes up less space.

**21. to Fr. Marcelo León**

Oviedo, January 1, 1934

My dear Master,

I received your kind letter on December 26, and I was most grateful for it. It gave me great consolation; for I am used to not receiving encouragement from anyone, and to considering myself to be so alone that, although I have God as my sole confidant, my weakness often seeks out human consolation. Of course, to me you are my true brothers, and I consider the voice of my superiors to be the voice of God Himself. And it's becoming clear to me that when God calls a soul, He wants that soul so detached from everything that He takes away even the material consolation of other creatures, and when the soul realizes it is alone, helpless, and seemingly deprived of everything . . . that is when, as I understand it, God is closest to the soul, and when the voice of His divine will can be heard most clearly.

Dear Father, things are much the same, but the moment approaches and I would be lying if I said that I don't fear it. At the same time, I have great confidence in God's protection, which leads me to keep going and face it all.

Truly, God's enemy is attacking me on all fronts. He has overcome me a few times, but in spite of everything, I haven't lost even an "inch" of ground, as you say. His victories are over my senses, and it's not that I want to make excuses for myself, quite the opposite. But since you have been in the world, you know this word, "comfort," which is like a god these days, adored by idolaters, and since that is what surrounds me, comfort and convenience, the enemy is using that to try and mislead me . . . But my spirit is with

God, and not only have I not lost even an “inch” in my resolution, but in fact I have advanced some “feet.” The more temptations I have, the steadier I will be on my path—not because of my own merits, of which I have none, and not because I think I am invincible, but rather because Our Lady is behind me. When I last left the monastery, I entrusted myself to Her care, and I believe I am thoroughly protected by Her.

I have let these days go by, since it didn’t seem like the right time to say anything, but one of these days I will start by telling my mother, for whom I ask your prayers.

Tomorrow I am going to visit the parish priest to ask him for the document I need.<sup>241</sup> And so, *little by little*, I will get where my fervent straining toward God has been wanting to go all at once . . . There are so many lessons we can draw from everything, even from our own weaknesses.

If you only knew, Father, how much dead weight I have to leave behind before presenting myself to God. Oh, people don’t understand us at all!! Even leading a pious life, you end up with so much dirt on your hands! . . . But in general, people are satisfied with very little. If you receive communion often, and say the rosary from time to time, that’s enough for them to start calling you holy. They’ll even put you on the altar if you’re not careful . . . But that’s not how God, who sees all and knows all, judges things . . . fortunately.

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<sup>241</sup> *The document I need*: A statement of good moral and religious conduct; an aspirant to religious life often needs a recommendation from a parish priest. Rafael’s family belonged to the parish of San Juan el Real, Oviedo, the pastor of which was Fr. Bernardino González.

The monastery will be two things for me: first, a corner of the world where I can praise God night and day without obstacles, and second, a purgatory on earth where I can become purified, become perfect, and become holy . . . Saying it like that, so casually . . . “become holy” . . . it seems like an aspiration that’s a bit . . . I don’t know how to put it, but that’s the truth. I want to be holy in the eyes of God, not in those of men; a holiness that develops in the choir, in the fields, and above all, a holiness that develops in silence, and that only God knows about, that not even I should discover, for then it would not be true holiness . . .

I recently read some verses that said, “Virtue that goes forth with great display is hardly virtue.”<sup>242</sup> Well, forgive me for going on so long with my stupid fantasies. I will be content with whatever God wishes, and what He permits me to be. I surrender my will and my good desires to Him. May He do the rest.

If you write to me, please do me the kindness of doing just what you did the other day, using my beloved uncle in Ávila as our intermediary.

The days are getting longer on me the more time I take to join my dear brother Trappists.

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<sup>242</sup> José María Pemán, *A Saint in a Hurry: El divino impaciente* (London: Sands and Co, 1935), 41. Pemán’s play, which premiered in 1933, recounts the life of the Jesuit co-founder and missionary Saint Francis Xavier and was written in response to the legal dissolution of the Jesuits under the Second Spanish Republic the previous year. See Niceto Alcalá-Zamora y Torres and Álvaro Albornoz y Liminiana, “Ministerio de Justicia: Decreto,” *Gaceta de Madrid* 24 (Jan. 1932): 610–611.

Happy New Year to Father Abbot and the community. With love from your  
novice, who commends himself to your prayers,

*Rafael Arnáiz*

**22. to Dom Félix Alonso García**

Oviedo, January 9, 1934

Rev. Father,

First of all, may God be praised, and let us give Him infinite thanks for the many blessings that we receive from Him and do not deserve.

Today you will receive a letter from my father, to whose generous Christian words I have nothing further to add.

My intention was to leave the house after just getting permission from my parents, but my father said that he has to do his duty, and he will take me to the monastery himself, and so, I think I should do my duty too, by obeying. Moreover, I think that once the sacrifice has been made, God will be satisfied that he made it so completely, all the way to the end, and although I trust in neither my own strength nor that of my parents, I have absolute confidence in God, who has not failed me until now, and I hope never will.

I cannot find the words to express the state of my soul, but Your Reverence will understand me perfectly. Things have been very painful for me, especially as I have been watching my parents suffer, but at the same time I have experienced consolation in understanding that their suffering is Christian and their sacrifice is pleasing in the eyes of God.

I don't deserve such parents as I have. I don't want to drag these days out too much, so I beg Your Reverence with all my might to write my father as soon as possible, telling him that we can come to the monastery.



I desire it with all my heart, and along with my tears and my broken heart, I also have a joy and a contentment and a calmness of spirit that are hard to understand. Truly, on a human level, what I am going through is very strange.

Please pray a lot for my parents, that God may help them in these difficult moments.

Greet Father Master and the community for me. I ask your blessing as your son in Christ,

*Rafael Arnáiz*

**23. to María Osorio and Leopoldo Barón**

Oviedo, January 12, 1934

My dearest aunt and uncle,

Just a quick note so that this letter goes out today.

I have nothing to say to you, because I have too few words to communicate it all, and the only thing I can say is that I haven't done anything. The Lord has done everything, absolutely everything. If you only knew how much He loves me, and how He has sustained me, and is sustaining me now! You would never ask Him for anything again, nor offer Him anything. It would all be reduced to praising Him without ceasing, blessing Him, and extolling Him, and continually singing a glorious song of thanksgiving and gratitude.

Lord, Lord, I ask *nothing* of you, because I already have You who are everything! Merely permit me to join the choir of angels, archangels, and cherubim, and all the heavenly host, and for my heart here on earth to fly up to heaven and sing, *Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom He favors!*<sup>243</sup>

If only you could see how happy I am to know that God has accepted what I have offered Him. Not what I have offered Him, which is worth little, but rather what my parents have so generously offered Him . . . What great souls!

What a great responsibility I have undertaken! But the Blessed Virgin is helping me in such a way that I can almost physically feel it. I want to pour my heart out, but

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<sup>243</sup> Luke 2:14.

what I have inside me is so great that I cannot, for if my joy is great, then great too—so great—is my sorrow . . . but much greater is my love for God . . . if not, this wouldn't be possible.

I can't yet tell you when I am leaving, because I am waiting for a letter from my good Father Abbot.

Things have gone much as the Nuncio<sup>244</sup> told me they would. My father did not only give me his permission, but in fact he is going to *offer me* himself; I am not running away from home, but rather I will bid my mother farewell . . . I am counting on neither my own strength nor that of my parents . . . I am counting on the help of the Virgin and the strength given by a God like ours.

The Nuncio's words come to mind: "Vocations must be pursued in such a way that is not just pleasing in the eyes of God, but gentle and sweet in the eyes of others. That is, without violence or convulsions, but the other way around: pleasantly." When this is possible, as it is in my case, it must be done this way. Perhaps you suffer more this way, I'm not saying you don't, but in the eyes of God it is more meritorious, don't you think?

Anyway, I'll write you when I am in my monastery.

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<sup>244</sup> *The Nuncio*: Monsignor Federico Tedeschini served as the apostolic nuncio, or papal diplomat, in Spain from 1921 to 1935. Leopoldo Barón introduced him to his nephew in 1933 while Rafael was deciding how to break the news about his vocation to his parents (OC 133).

I'm sending you this money for my grandmother, but I'm sending it to you because I don't know if she is in Madrid or not. Careful now, don't you think that I've gone and stolen anything! My aunt gave me a few *pesetas*, in case I needed anything, but the first thing I thought of was you, and my grandmother, among others . . . I hope that this will not offend you, good sir.

If she is still staying with you, give her a big hug from me. As for you, my dearest aunt and uncle, nothing, because as you can tell, your nephew doesn't care much for you at all

*Rafael*

**24. Dedication of a Little Office to Mercedes Barón Torres<sup>245</sup>**

January 14, 1934

Mother . . . I am giving everything to Him . . . everything I am and everything I am worth, I am giving to Him with all my good will and sincerity, and now I only ask Him to accept it . . . Ask Him for this too, Mother, and tell Him, “Lord, my son is offering You his life and his works, and is surrendering himself entirely to You; do not reject his offering, for although it may always be imperfect, he is doing it for pure love of You . . . Accept my son, Lord; a mother is begging you.”

And so you, in the world, and I, in the monastery, both have something to offer to God. I offer Him all that I am, and you offer your son,

*Rafael*

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<sup>245</sup> *Little Office*: The Little Office of the Blessed Virgin Mary is a devotion to Mary that shares the structure of the monastic hours. Before the Second Vatican Council, it was often said as an addition to the Divine Office among religious, or as a replacement for it among laity.

**25. Dedication of a holy card to Mercedes Barón Torres**

January 14, 1934

The only consolation that we creatures can have is to delight in God, and that is why I am going to La Trapa. There, seven times a day, I will sing canticles in His honor, just as King David did.<sup>246</sup> Remember, then, whenever you raise your eyes to God, that your son Rafael is in a choir of men on earth singing with joy in imitation of the angels in heaven, “Hosanna in the highest.” Remember that he will never retire any evening without having first offered a devout *Salve*<sup>247</sup> to the Blessed Virgin for his father, his mother, his brothers, and his sister, so that soon, up above, we might all keep singing with joy to a God as good as Jesus.

*Rafael*

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<sup>246</sup> Ps 119:164: *Seven times a day I praise you for your righteous ordinances.*

<sup>247</sup> See note on the *Salve Regina* in Letter 10.

### III. A Trappist Novice

#### *Letters from Rafael's postulancy and novitiate, January–April 1934*

Rafael was received into the community at La Trapa on January 16, 1934 as a postulant, meaning someone who is seeking admission into a religious order. During his month of postulancy (spanning Letters 26 through 30), he would have worn secular clothing and participated in prayer from the visitors' section while getting to know the community and adjusting to their schedule.

Regardless of one's status in the monastery, life at San Isidro de Dueñas was governed by the same basic practices laid down by the Rule of Saint Benedict: prayer and work, in that order. A monk's primary task is worshiping God through the Liturgy, which has two main parts: the Mass and the Liturgy of the Hours, also known as the Divine Office. At San Isidro de Dueñas, the day's prayer began with Matins at two o'clock in the morning (or one o'clock on feast days) and continued throughout the day. Monks were instructed to leave behind every other task at the ring of the prayer bell, for, as the Rule states, "nothing is to be preferred to the Work of God."<sup>248</sup>

As for the rest of the day's work, there was plenty of manual labor to be done at La Trapa. The monks lived off the land they farmed themselves, as well as the income from the chocolate factory they ran. Domestic tasks such as cooking, cleaning, and laundry also required a great deal of labor, since the community had hundreds of members during this time.

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<sup>248</sup> RB 43.3.

In addition to prayer and work, Rafael's life at San Isidro was defined by the observance of silence. Members of the community were not to speak outside of participating in the Liturgy, although they could talk with their superiors under special circumstances and used Cistercian sign language for minimal communication during the day. Rafael struggled somewhat to become accustomed to this practice of continual silence:

I'm convinced that silence helps one hold onto God's presence . . . but it is also a great penance, especially at certain moments and certain times. For example, when it's a splendid day out, and you're going to work in the fields, and working in the fields is cheerful; well, the cheerfulness that you'd like to express by jumping around and singing, you have to quiet it down instead, and offer it to God in silence . . . And that is rather beautiful, but you have to get used to it. I told Father Master that sometimes I feel like crying out, and he told me to channel that energy into singing in choir, and so that's what I do. Life at La Trapa boils down to singing in choir and singing out of choir; sometimes shouting out, other times in silence, but the song is the same.<sup>249</sup>

This process of adjustment to monastic practices deepened as Rafael transitioned from the postulancy to the novitiate, which he officially entered on February 18, 1934. Upon reception into the novitiate, he was clothed with the habit and received a religious

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<sup>249</sup> Letter 28.



name, becoming Brother María Rafael. He also became an official member of the novitiate community, which occupied a designated part of the monastery for monks-in-training who shared work duties and a common dormitory.

The other members of the novitiate were Rafael's three co-novices: Brother María Isidro David (Felipe) Ortega, who later left the monastery during the Spanish Civil War; Brother María Bernardo Michelena Castañeda, who spent most of his monastic life as a chaplain to Trappist nuns in Japan; and Brother María Damián Yáñez Neira, who moved to the Trappist monastery of Oseira in Galicia, Spain.<sup>250</sup> All four novices reported to the novice master, Father Marcelo León ("Father Master"), and his assistant, Father Francisco Díez ("Father Sub-Master"). Together, Fathers Marcelo and Francisco were responsible for the spiritual formation of the novices as well as their introduction into the life and work of the community. They would need to grant permission for the novices to write letters, as well as provide them with paper and writing implements. Moreover, they would read the novices' incoming and outgoing mail.

Even so, Rafael's letters to his parents as a novice are as upbeat and open as ever. Overjoyed to finally be a member of the community, he reassured them that he was no less a member of their family:

I'm very happy, and I want you to be too. If there's one thing in the world that concerns me, it's my parents . . . and since coming here, I love you even more . . . God doesn't ask me to stop loving you, quite the opposite . . . He just tells me, "You shall love the Lord your God above all things." As such, what He asks of

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<sup>250</sup> OC 188–189.

me is to love Him first, and then my parents . . . I imagine you won't be jealous of such a great Lord.<sup>251</sup>

Still, Rafael and his family both were continuing to adjust to his renunciation of his former ways. While Rafael's work as an artist had been an essential part of his identity as a student before, as a Trappist, he was coming to understand work as fundamentally oriented toward God rather than self:

What you shouldn't do is worry about whether my hands are using a paintbrush or a hoe . . . in the eyes of God it's all the same, so long as they are being used for His greater glory . . . and He can be praised through anything . . .<sup>252</sup>

Ultimately, even that nascent view of his life's work would soon come to be challenged. On May 26, 1934, Rafael was forced to leave the monastery due to grave illness from diabetes and moved back in with his parents in Oviedo to recuperate. His work was no longer that of a typical novice, sweating away in the fields. Instead, he was given the task of suffering—a task that, as we will see, transformed his understanding of his vocation.

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<sup>251</sup> Letter 32.

<sup>252</sup> Letter 33.

**26. to Mercedes Barón Torres**

the guesthouse at La Trapa, January 16, 1934

My dearest mother,

Just a quick note to let you know that soon, at two in the afternoon, I will be entering the community and will go to the choir at Vespers; of course if I am happy, I hope that you are too.

Yesterday my father left me here. He spent a long time with Rev. Fr. Abbot. Afterwards I went to the *Salve*,<sup>253</sup> then I had dinner and went to bed. Today I got up late and spent a good while with Father Master. He told me that he'd come look for me at two.

I suppose you will all be together in Oviedo now, giving thanks to God at all times for the great blessing He has given us; I, at least, do not cease giving Him thanks for everything.

I wanted to tell you so many things but I don't have the words for any of them. All of you are in my heart, especially you, my dear mother. Did you like the dedications I wrote for you?<sup>254</sup>

Keep praising God for everything, and asking the Blessed Virgin to pray for my perseverance, for if we receive anything from God it is always through Her intercession.

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<sup>253</sup> *Salve*: See Letter 5.

<sup>254</sup> *The dedications I wrote for you*: See Dedications 24 and 25.

Now they are distributing food to the poor; Father told me that yesterday there were more than a hundred of them.<sup>255</sup>

It is splendidly sunny out today, not like yesterday which was rather gloomy.

Right now I am impatiently awaiting the Novice Master and wanting it to be time for me to take my place in choir already. How happy I will be, dear Mother. Look, my first prayers will be a hymn of thanksgiving for God that will burst forth from my heart, but afterwards, for whom will I pray if not for my parents? That is the one thing that I think can console you.

I will write you more slowly when the Novice Master gives me permission to do so. For today, be content with knowing that your son is content, that he is praying a lot for you all, and that he is in the hands of the Virgin, who is the protectress of the Order.

Without further ado, know of all your son's love as he asks for your blessing,

*Rafael*

I really want a smoke, but I don't know what's going on with me. Somehow I end up forgetting that I want to.

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<sup>255</sup> See Manuscript 7.

**27. to Rafael Arnáiz Sánchez de la Campa and Mercedes Barón Torres**

La Trapa, January 23, 1934<sup>256</sup>

It is six-thirty in the morning, and I am overcome with drowsiness. Brother Damián<sup>257</sup> noticed, and he signed to me that I won't fall asleep if I write, and I'll be able to keep my eyes open more easily that way . . . So without further ado beyond a Hail Mary, I have taken up pen and paper and begun to write.

I have been in the monastery for exactly eight days, in which I have tried to submit everything in my power to the Rule,<sup>258</sup> and for now all I can say is that I am very sleepy . . . I go to bed at seven in the evening, and with the grace of God, I fall asleep immediately. At one, the pain in my lower back wakes me up, since it's not exactly a feather mattress that I'm sleeping on. I change position at one, as I was saying, and just when I think I've fallen asleep again . . . Bong! The bell tells me that it's two and that I have to go down to Matins . . . I don't doubt it for a minute, not even a second. I just put on my slippers and coat, since I sleep in my clothes, and then wash my face a little. And then, thinking of God, with a joyful heart, I go down the novitiate stairs at full speed and enter the church, where my God is in the Tabernacle waiting for His monks to start

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<sup>256</sup> Although originally intended as an exercise to keep him awake, Rafael did end up attaching this sheet of paper (27) and the following one (28) to a letter to his parents dated January 29, 1934 (29). See OC 185.

<sup>257</sup> Brother María Damián Yáñez Neira.

<sup>258</sup> *The Rule*: The Rule of Saint Benedict (see Manuscript 7).

singing His praises . . . And once there, in the choir of a Cistercian abbey, fifty men begin to live the monastic day, gazing down and singing the words the angel spoke to Mary:

“Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you.”<sup>259</sup>

I think that at that moment, the Queen of Heaven must look upon her sons with tenderness, and God Himself must delight in Mary . . . And so it is well worth the effort to get up at two and be a little sleepy.

Well, Brother Damián was right, I’m not sleepy anymore. Blasted nature, what a pain you are!! But I hope that with God’s help I will conquer and master you, and for that, I need only one thing, persistence and prayer . . . and surely, without even realizing it, after a certain amount of time I won’t be as sleepy as I am now, but nothing to be done about that . . . even the apostles fell asleep in the garden,<sup>260</sup> and left Jesus all alone . . . and they’re apostles, so what am I, a poor sinner, to do?

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<sup>259</sup> Luke 1:28.

<sup>260</sup> Matt 26:40–46; Mark 14:37–42; Luke 22:45–46.

**28. to Rafael Arnáiz Sánchez de la Campa and Mercedes Barón Torres<sup>261</sup>**

La Trapa, January 24, 1934

How beautiful silence is! Especially here in La Trapa, where we all understand one another with a simple look; but above all, God understands us, and I think that is enough . . . The Rule of Saint Benedict is admirable, but silence is what gives it the quality of holiness.<sup>262</sup> That joyful silence of the cloister and the gardens, where everything falls silent, except the birds who sing to God.

I live together with three novices<sup>263</sup> who, since I have been here, have not spoken to me except through signing.<sup>264</sup> I already know how to make a few signs, but . . . how I'd like to say a paragraph or two to my beloved brothers! I'm convinced that silence helps one hold onto God's presence . . . but it is also a great penance, especially at certain

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<sup>261</sup> A loose sheet of paper included with a letter to his parents. See Letter 27.

<sup>262</sup> For notes on the Rule and monastic silence, see Manuscript 7.

<sup>263</sup> The three other novices were Brother María Isidro David (Felipe) Ortega, who left the monastery upon being drafted during the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939) and eventually became a doctor; Brother María Bernardo Michelena Castañeda, who spent most of his monastic life as a chaplain to Trappist nuns in Japan; and Brother María Damián Yáñez Neira, who moved to the Trappist monastery of Oseira in Galicia, Spain. Brothers Bernardo and Damián both attended Rafael's beatification in Rome on September 27, 1992.

<sup>264</sup> See note on monastic sign language in Letter 5.

moments and certain times. For example, when it's a splendid day out, and you're going to work in the fields, and working in the fields is cheerful; well, the cheerfulness that you'd like to express by jumping around and singing, you have to quiet it down instead, and offer it to God in silence . . . And that is rather beautiful, but you have to get used to it. I told Father Master that sometimes I feel like crying out, and he told me to channel that energy into singing in choir, and so that's what I do.

As you can see, life at La Trapa boils down to singing in choir and singing out of choir; sometimes shouting out, other times in silence, but the song is the same. And although my own is rather poor, and sometimes I sing it quite sleepily, I think God will accept it, and I pray to the Blessed Virgin that it may be so.

This morning, January 24, it was snowy, so after high Mass, we'll go to the chocolate factory to wrap chocolates.<sup>265</sup> I'm really slow, but lucky for me, I don't get paid by the piece. We have two hours of work, that is, two hours of absolute silence, and I promise I don't get tired or bored, because what I do is think. When I say it like that, it sounds absurd, because everybody thinks, but it's not like that—thinking is a difficult thing. Of course I mean thinking well, thinking in an orderly fashion, so as to benefit from it; thinking calmly, getting hold of your imagination and taking it where you will . . . I devote myself to all that while I wrap up chocolates, and if I pray a Hail Mary from

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<sup>265</sup> Until 1960, the monks at San Isidro de Dueñas made part of their income by making chocolate. As Rafael implies, novices would generally work in the fields unless the ground was too frozen, and then they might be assigned to the chocolate factory or the kitchen for the day.



time to time, I get even more out of the work, and the chocolate is wrapped better. Here in La Trapa you may be asked to do anything except waste time.

**29. to Mercedes Barón Torres**

La Trapa, January 29, 1934

My dearest mother,

I hope you aren't cranky that your son didn't write you earlier, but you must know that here in La Trapa nothing is up to us, but rather to our superiors, and in this case, it is Father Master who has the final say. I got permission to write you yesterday, that is, Sunday, but I was with my father so I couldn't.<sup>266</sup> He'll tell you how I seemed and how I'm doing . . . In short, very well.

I appreciated your letter very much, and so did Father Master. He told me that it was written in a very literary style with great Christian sentiment, and that he was going to ask your permission to copy it . . . Of course I am proud of my parents, and praising God in them.

Today it has been fifteen days since I came to the monastery, but it feels as if I just arrived yesterday. I have adjusted very well to the Rule.<sup>267</sup> Upon first glance, seen from the outside, it seems very hard, but the only hard thing here is my bed . . . Everything else is austere, but not inhumane, far from it.

If only you knew what great peace we breathe here, what silent joy fills the abbey; it cannot be explained, for that joy and that peace are God who reigns in the house, and He is the only focal point of monastic life.

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<sup>266</sup> Rafael's father, Rafael Arnáiz Sánchez de la Campa, visited him on January 28, 1934.

<sup>267</sup> *The Rule*: The Rule of Saint Benedict (see Manuscript 7).

All of a Cistercian monk's activity revolves around the Tabernacle. The hours of the Divine Office in choir are never tiresome; the hours spent in church seem mere minutes . . . Faith tells us that we are praising God, and God is there, so nearby, just a few steps away in the Tabernacle . . . What does the world know about a Trappist monastery?! I am ever more grateful to God for my vocation, and I ask Him to carry me from Venta de Baños to heaven, so that face to face with Him, as Saint Thérèse says,<sup>268</sup> I can keep on singing.

There are so many things I could tell you, but my pen is rather uninspired, and would not be able to put into words what I am feeling . . . I am content, utterly content, for God loves me so much, and the Blessed Virgin helps me in such a way . . . as only She knows how.

Now I'm going to tell you what I enjoy most and what I find hardest . . . you can guess at both. What I like best is being in Choir, and what I find hardest is getting up at two, because here there's none of that "first one eye and then the other" business, no thinking about it and then going back to sleep again . . . No, at the sound of the bell, before it has even stopped ringing, we should already be on our feet, dressed and with our shoes on, because the bell rings at two and Matins begin ten minutes later.

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<sup>268</sup> "Notwithstanding my exceeding littleness, I dare to gaze upon the Divine Sun of Love, and I burn to dart upwards unto Him! . . . With daring self-abandonment there will I remain until death, my gaze fixed upon that Divine Sun" (Saint Thérèse of Lisieux Martin, *The Story of a Soul* [Project Gutenberg, 2005], 11.22).

Your intention to pray the Little Office of the Blessed Virgin Mary at the same time seems a little over the top to me, because look:

Matins and Lauds	at 2:10 in the morning
Prime	at 5:30 in the morning
Terce and Sext	at 7:45 in the morning
None	at 11:07 in the morning
Vespers	at 4:30 in the afternoon
Compline	at 6:30 in the evening <sup>269</sup>

That's when we pray the hours in the winter, the schedule varies in the summer.

Now we are going to the conventual Mass, that is, at 7:45. First we pray Terce, then we have Mass, and afterwards Sext. Then we go to work, whether that's pulling up vines or wrapping chocolate bars at the factory. It depends on the weather, because when there's frost, the ground is very hard and it's cold out.

Well . . . that's all for today.

I'm sending you two other pieces of paper that I scribbled on other day.

Don't be alarmed by the different paper, here we make use of everything and everything is useful.

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<sup>269</sup> For the Divine Office, see 7; for the Little Office, see Dedication 24.

If you see any friends of mine, give them my regards. I won't name them, but since there are so few of them, there's no need. But do give them to Mr. Fernando Vallaura<sup>270</sup> in particular.

As for you, and my brothers and sister, what can I say? . . . Only that I think of you all when I should, and where I should.

Now we are going to None and then to the refectory, to eat our "daily bread," since we just came from the chocolate factory.

I don't know when I will write you next . . . whenever they order me to. Right now I am coming from the refectory. We had black beans, milk, bread, wine, and nuts. What do you think of the menu? . . . In a little bit we'll have class on the Constitutions of the Order,<sup>271</sup> and then we'll go to work . . . I'm telling you, not a minute is to be wasted.

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<sup>270</sup> *Mr. Fernando Vallaura*: The father of Rafael's close friend Juan Vallaura; see Letter 9.

<sup>271</sup> *The Constitutions of the Order*: "The meaning of the word 'constitutions': a rule is the norm of living by which the monk attains to his end, union with God. Constitutions are particular statutes, added to the *Rule*, approved by the Holy See. . . . The *Constitutions* interpret and apply the *Rule* to our way of life" (Thomas Merton, *Charter, Customs, and Constitutions of the Cistercians: Initiation into the Monastic Tradition* 7, ed. Patrick F. O'Connell [Collegeville, MN: Cistercian Publications, 2015], 57). San Isidro de Dueñas was governed by the 1924 Constitutions, translated into English as *Constitutions of the Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance* (Dublin: M.H. Gill & Sons, 1925).

I think of you all often, and at the happiest moments, for I should so like for you to be able to participate in the joys of a Trappist novitiate.

Give my aunt<sup>272</sup> many hugs from me, and the same to my brothers and sister. Nothing for my father, as I just saw him yesterday. As for you, all my love as your novice Rafael who as promised remembers you *every* day at 6:45 after praying the Salve to the Blessed Virgin (don't get the idea that I think of my family at set times . . . ). Oh, I'll never learn how to write seriously.

Without further ado, a big hug from your son

*Rafael*

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<sup>272</sup> *My aunt*: Petra Sánchez de la Campa y Tasquer, Rafael's paternal great-aunt, who was living with the Arnáiz-Barón family in Oviedo at the time.

### 30. to Mercedes Barón Torres

La Trapa, January 30, 1934

My dearest mother,

My letter can't go out today, so I have time to fill up another sheet of paper for you.

I am longing for the day when I receive the habit, which I suspect will be in the next fifteen days or so, since I have to have been a postulant for at least a month. I don't know what name I will be given, but Father Master told me it's possible that I'll keep my own, since there isn't another Rafael in the monastery.<sup>273</sup>

For yesterday's work, we moved sacks of potatoes from the warehouse to the monastery. I'm telling you, I'm very good at loading and unloading sacks. After work, I go and make sure what I've done is all accounted for. That is, I go to the chapel and tell the Master<sup>274</sup> all about it, and whenever I go to see Him, I have something for Him to take note of, so that later He can pay my wages all at once. One day it's a few vines

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<sup>273</sup> In Rafael's monastery, postulants received a religious name along with the habit upon entering the novitiate. The religious name could be the same as the postulant's baptismal name, provided no one else in the community already had it. Generally, a postulant would not receive a double name (e.g. "Jude Thaddeus," "Francis Xavier") except to add a form of Mary (e.g. "Marie Éphrem," "María Marcelo").

<sup>274</sup> *Master*: Rafael uses the title "Master" on its own to refer to Jesus in the Eucharist, as distinct from "Father Master," a title used for the master of novices (see Letter 17).

pulled or holes filled, another day it's chocolates wrapped, another it's rooms swept, etc. . . . At the end of the day, I'm just doing business, and I'm telling you, with a Master as generous as mine, it's a profitable business indeed.

The other day I was in the chapel alone. I'd just come back from the factory, where I had been wrapping chocolates. And there in the chapel it was just God and me, ready to report back to Him. On my knees before the Tabernacle, my soul offered my most recent work to God, those two hours wrapping chocolates in silence, and one of those things that happen sometimes, in fact happened to me . . . You'll see . . .

In an outburst of enthusiasm, I addressed the following prayer to my God: "Lord, you are so high up, and I am here below, where in a more or less generous way, a poor Trappist wants to send You a humble gift, and all he has to give You right now is the work of wrapping up a few dozen pieces of chocolate . . . and believe me, if I could rise up to heaven to give You my offering myself, and then come back down to the chocolate factory at La Trapa, I would . . . believe me."

And since foolish things occur to me even in prayer, as I was getting up I thought, "I could really use an airplane." And just having said that, the silence of the Castilian skies was broken by the powerful motor of an airplane that just so happened to be flying over the monastery.

Believe me, I was going to get up, but I stayed there on my knees, and now I didn't say anything to God . . . I just thought about the airplane that I had imagined passing by La Trapa, picking up chocolates from a novice who couldn't fly, and then, rudders and controls all aiming for the heavens, went to deliver them to God . . . And the Master stayed in the Tabernacle, and His servant stayed on his knees and in silence,



listening to the noise of the powerful motor fading as it flew away at full speed through the Castilian skies.

Anyway, I didn't come to La Trapa to write literature . . . I just do that without even trying.

Today a magnificent frost fell, and at five o'clock this morning the moonlight was so bright you could read by it . . . Just a few moments ago, in choir, my lips spoke the words of the *Benedicite*,<sup>275</sup> "Ice and cold, bless the Lord; sun, sky, and stars, bless the Lord," so when I left the church it didn't bother me that it was below freezing, for it was exactly the cold that I was feeling that was blessing the Lord. But nevertheless, we are very weak, and so while my soul was close to God, my body was close to the novitiate radiator.

I don't know when this letter will go out. Today is the 31<sup>st</sup>, and right now, it's five in the morning (just to give you more detail).

Today we sang the Office for the Dead<sup>276</sup> with solemnity, because today is one of the Order's anniversaries. It is truly marvelous, and has filled me with great fervor. If one

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<sup>275</sup> *Benedicite*: A canticle, also called the Song of Creation, taken from Dan 3:56–88 and included in the Divine Office (see Manuscript 7). Rafael combines verses 69 (*Bless the Lord, ice and cold*), 62 (*Bless the Lord, sun and moon*) and 63 (*Bless the Lord, stars of heaven*).

<sup>276</sup> *Office for the Dead*: The Office for the Dead is a cycle in the Liturgy of the Hours (see Manuscript 7) prayed in intercession for souls in purgatory. Cistercian monasteries have

wanted to write the psalms of the Office for the Dead anew, it would be impossible . . . My head and heart are so full . . . I can't explain what I felt in choir this morning, but despite my not understanding Latin, David's<sup>277</sup> words filled my soul in such a way that I drew close to God, in order to beg His mercy and to ask Him to stay His wrath on the great and sublime day of the resurrection.

This morning, when I was singing in choir, I didn't know what I was praying for, but I did know that I was praying for something very great, something that human understanding cannot comprehend.

The cold days persist, and so do the bitter frosts, and yesterday the wind was so strong that it whistled as it grazed the tower steeple and swayed the cypress trees in the cemetery. At Vespers, only two things could be heard in the monastery: the wind as it ran across the plains, and the song of the psalmody; nature and men joined in offering our praises to God. The wind caressed the monastery, grazing the bells, and the monks in choir caressed Jesus in the Tabernacle with the psalms.

I could write so many things. To me, this life that seems monotonous has so many charms, and I do not tire of it for even a moment. Each hour is different. Though they are all exteriorly the same, interiorly they are not, just as all Masses are not the same, and each time you go to choir the Office seems different, or at least it does to me. Of course, that doesn't mean that one day the lentils taste like partridge and another day they taste

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historically recited it with great frequency, particularly for the deceased members of the Order, as Rafael implies here.

<sup>277</sup> *David*: i.e. King David, traditionally identified as the author of the Psalms.

like *tortilla de patatas*,<sup>278</sup> no . . . lentils will always be lentils as long as I am in the monastery, but despite everything, I eat them with great pleasure, because I season them with two things: hunger and love of God. Just like that, there's no food I can resist.

The sun has already risen. In just a moment we will go to conventual Mass and then to work. And so, little by little, little by little, one day after the other, we wait patiently for God to call us to keep blessing Him for all eternity, but without having to package chocolates or eat lentils.

Truly, whenever I remember that work lasts but a day while rest lasts an eternity, I can do anything with pleasure and joy . . . it all comes and goes.

Well, that seems like enough paper to me, don't you think?

I ask you, my dear mother, to remember me in your prayers; I think it unnecessary to remind you.

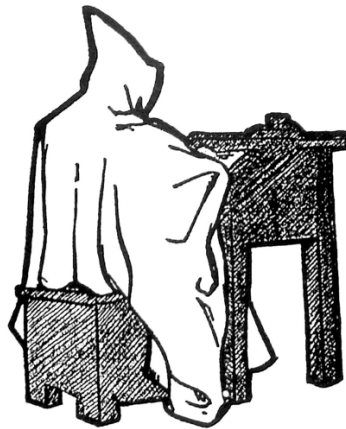


Fig. 2<sup>279</sup>

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<sup>278</sup> *Tortilla de patatas*: potato omelette, a very common dish in Spanish cuisine.

<sup>279</sup> Unlike most of Rafael's letters, this one is unsigned. Instead, it ends with a drawing of a monk sitting at a desk and writing. Antonio Cobos Soto, *La pintura mensaje del*

## 31. to Mercedes Barón Torres

La Trapa, February 18, 1934

First Sunday of Lent

My dearest mother,

As of just an hour ago, your son is no longer simply Rafael, but now his name is Brother María Rafael<sup>280</sup> . . . aren't you pleased? I know you are, because I still have the same name as I did before, but adding the name of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and rather than "Don"<sup>281</sup> . . . "Brother" . . . My dearest mother, I am so happy. Today I was given the habit; I am greatly moved, and can do nothing more than bless God who loves me so much.

I'm writing you today as a special favor, and just to give you the news.<sup>282</sup> Father Master gave me your letter, which I enjoyed very much, this morning after the ceremony,

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*Hermano Rafael: Estudio crítico de la obra pictórica del venerable Rafael Arnáiz Barón, monje trapense* (Burgos: Monte Carmelo, 1989), 231.

<sup>280</sup> In accordance with the Trappist convention at the time, Rafael retained his baptismal name. The addition of "María" would only be used in writing, not to address him in public or private (see Letter 30).

<sup>281</sup> *Don*: In Spanish, the honorific "don" was historically used to address nobility but by the 20<sup>th</sup> century had a general connotation of respect.

<sup>282</sup> During Lent, the monks were usually not permitted to write or receive letters.

for it had arrived on exactly the day that I was beginning my retreat<sup>283</sup> . . . so he did not give it to me until today . . . Of course I will write you a long, lengthy letter when I can; right now, during Holy Lent, we devote ourselves to much greater silence, recollection, and prayer, and we neither write nor receive letters . . . So you will have to wait a few days then.

Father Master told me to tell you not to visit so soon, because it is way too cold to stay in the guesthouse now. But rather come in June, or sometime around then, when it will be much more lovely and pleasant, flowers in bloom . . . the fields will be splendid. At any rate, you won't be in the guesthouse with your teeth chattering.

I'm all white now, at least on the outside;<sup>284</sup> now I'm going to make every effort to be so on the inside too, which is the most important thing . . . Today I renewed all my good intentions and resolutions . . . I offered my sacrifice to Jesus in Holy Communion—along with that of my parents, don't think that I've forgotten about you. After being clothed as a novice, and seeing myself so loved by my brothers, my soul is so content that it can only praise God in all things . . . The heart of a novice, full of love for God, cannot be comprehended . . . My dearest mother, it is a very great thing . . . very great. I cannot put it into words.

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<sup>283</sup> Before receiving the habit and entering the novitiate, postulants would prepare by undertaking an eight-day retreat.

<sup>284</sup> Cistercian novices receive an all-white habit. Upon profession of vows, the novice's white scapular is replaced with a black one.

I should so like for my letter to be longer, but I've already told you the reasons for its brevity. Don't measure my love by sheets of paper . . . May it be enough for you to know that your son is content, happy, just as you say Saint Teresa would want, for she indeed said that "a sad saint would be a sorry saint"<sup>285</sup> . . . but don't worry, here in La Trapa is where I have seen the most joy gathered together . . . And besides, God treats us so well that we cannot be sad . . . that would be a sin against Him.

I'm as bald as a billiard ball now . . . well, not as much as a billiard ball, no . . . I have a little more hair than that.<sup>286</sup>

I'll have many things to tell you when you come visit . . . I think when you see me, I won't be as clean as I am today, looking like a novice fresh out of the package.

As you know, I haven't been feeling well, but I'm telling you that myself so you know I'm not hiding anything from you . . . But I was just doing the same thing as all my brothers who had the flu. We all spent two or three days in the infirmary. Fortunately, the epidemic is over . . . I can't tell you how charitably they treat the sick here. During those days, I didn't observe the community schedule, and afterwards, when you get out of the infirmary, for eight days they give you what they call "indulgences" at mealtimes, that is, eggs or something else that's special.

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<sup>285</sup> This adage, which Rafael attributes to Saint Teresa of Ávila, is more often attributed to Saint Francis de Sales, though it does not appear in the writings of either saint.

<sup>286</sup> Rafael is referring to the practice of tonsure, which involves shaving the top of one's head upon entrance into the novitiate as a sign of transition into religious life.

It's true, the life here is hard, but everything is so well arranged that it becomes not just tolerable, but pleasant . . . The hood does make life a bit hotter though . . . I'm telling you, when summer arrives . . . I'm going to melt away little by little, and one day they'll go looking for Brother M. Rafael and find nothing more than a habit.

The cloak, scapular, tunic, shirt, stockings, and slippers are all made from the same fabric: white wool; the only exception is the undergarments, which are rougher and a brownish-gray color. I promise, I'm very comfortable.

I am ever more convinced that God made La Trapa for me, and me for La Trapa. It is clear that the only actionable wisdom in this world is to place ourselves where God intended us to be . . . and, once we have come to know His will, to surrender ourselves to Him wholeheartedly.

The last prayers I said as a layman were a few Hail Marys to the Blessed Virgin, and as for the first ones I said as a novice, I'm not sure . . . because when I was kneeling in the middle of the chapterhouse, and all my brother monks were singing the *Benedictus* solemnly<sup>287</sup> . . . my soul was before God, and I offered my sacrifice to Him with a heart overflowing with joy, but also some very obvious tears . . . I believe that at that moment the angels, upon seeing me cry, sang the *Benedictus* too . . . But now I can die happy . . .

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<sup>287</sup> Novices are clothed in chapter, or the community gathering space, rather than in the chapel, as a sign of entering into the community more fully. After the novice receives the habit and his or her religious name, the community sings the *Benedictus*, or Cantic of Zechariah (Luke 1:68–79), as a song of thanksgiving.

now I am a Trappist. Pray to God that I might persevere, and I am praying for you too . . .  
Much is demanded of me, for much has been given to me.<sup>288</sup>

If only you could see how much we love one another here at La Trapa; today, naturally, anyone I come across in the hallway gives me a hug . . . And in silence we gladden one another.

Well, I'll tell you much more in my next letter, but for now I am going to focus on observing Lent devoutly, for the sake of all those in the world today who do not remember to think of God.

Sending you all a hug and even more, your son the Cistercian novice,

*Brother María Rafael*

I will send you the *Salve*<sup>289</sup> soon, but first you have to come hear it.

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<sup>288</sup> Luke 12:48

<sup>289</sup> See note on the *Salve Regina* in Letter 7. Rafael is referring to the musical notation used at the monastery.



### 32. to Rafael Arnáiz Sánchez de la Campa

La Trapa, February 19, 1934

My dearest father,

Yesterday, when I gave Father Master the letter I'd written, he gave me yours and told me to answer it, and to ask you the following question on behalf of Father Abbot.<sup>290</sup> He asked me to tell you that eight or ten years ago they planted some live oaks here . . . about twenty or thirty of them, and they turned out all twisted and going every which way. So, it's a matter of fixing them . . . Some say that we ought to cut them down and let them grow back, others say to prune them and guide them with stakes . . . What do you think?<sup>291</sup> . . . Make sure to say specifically what needs to be done . . . and I'm sure if you figure it out, Rev. Fr. will name you the Certified Technical Advisor of the Trappist Monastery of San Isidro.

It seems very good to me that you should go about your life as always . . . that's the natural thing, and it's what God asks of you . . . Each of us should play the part that God has given us to perform in this great comedy, as Calderón says in *The Great Theater of the World*.<sup>292</sup> Some in the world, others in the cloister, with the difference being that

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<sup>290</sup> *Father Abbot*: Dom Félix Alonso García (see Letter 5).

<sup>291</sup> Rafael's father, Rafael Arnáiz Sánchez de la Campa, was a forest engineer.

<sup>292</sup> "Ages ago I cast mankind to be / My company, and they're the ones who'll act / In this great theater of the world. / I'll give a part to each one that appears" (Pedro Calderón

those who are in the cloister should not think of the world; as for those who are in the world, what they should do is think of God . . . The thing is simple enough; I will not attain more glory for being in the convent, nor will you attain less for not being in one . . . For at the hour when God calls us forth to Judgment, of me He shall demand having been a good Trappist, and of you, having been a good forest engineer and Christian father . . . which is what, with God's help, you are.

You've told me to pray for your needs . . . and who doesn't have needs? . . . But don't worry, your son thinks of you more than you realize . . . I will pray for your spiritual needs and also for your material ones . . . You know, that's what I do. Let's see if God wants Fernando to continue with the Bank of Spain<sup>293</sup> . . . You ask men to put in a good word, which is necessary, and I'll ask God to do the same . . . maybe God will listen to me . . . not because of my merits, but because I'm a tremendous flatterer. May He forgive me, if what I say to Him causes offense.

In yesterday's letter I told you that I'd burst into tears in chapter, but the great flood actually came at collation in the refectory, because they gave us white beans with carrots and then salad, which we prepared ourselves, made of beets and some green leaves, I don't know what they were, and . . . oh! something terrible, one of those long

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de la Barca, "The Great Theater of the World," trans. Rick Davis, *Theater* 34, no. 1 [January 2004]: 130).

<sup>293</sup> Rafael's brother, Luis Fernando, was studying aeronautical engineering in Belgium at the time. He signed up for the competitive examinations required to work at the Bank of Spain, but in the end he did not go through with them (OC 211).

onions that's thick as a cigar and about eight inches long. It reminded me a lot of my mother, who likes them so much, and I don't know if it was the memory of my mother or the provocation of the onion, but the thing is, my eyes got all red and tears streamed abundantly down my cheeks . . . Now, just between us . . . I think that it was the onion that made me cry.

I'm a rather dissolute monk . . . unfortunately . . . I'm in a good mood, just as I always am, but since I can't talk or shout or run, I have to swallow it . . . So maybe I get a terrible urge to whistle when I see my brothers, and myself among them, with our hoods up and eating onions . . . A thousand ideas for mischief come to mind, because while I always see the sublime side of La Trapa, I see the amusing side of it too . . . Well, that seems like a contradiction, to say La Trapa is an amusing place . . . but the thing is, I never get bored, I don't even know what that word means.

All right, I'm going to see if I can finish this letter, because I'm telling you, I don't have time for anything . . . The days fly by . . . I've hardly gotten up when it's already time to go to bed . . . Here we live by the minute, and we make the most of them all. Everything is so regimented that the things you do, one after the other, switching off with the Divine Office—that is, during what we call “intervals,”<sup>294</sup> which are set aside for study or reading or prayer—they go by quite quickly. And then the same happens with the hours you spend in church . . . when you're in choir with the psalter<sup>295</sup> in front of you,

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<sup>294</sup> *Intervals*: In the monastic schedule, any time not officially assigned to work or prayer is referred to as an “interval.” Monks and nuns may use this “free time” as they see fit.

<sup>295</sup> *Psalter*: an arrangement of the Psalms for use in the Liturgy of the Hours.

hour after hour can pass by without you even noticing. Plus, there's something different each day of the year, whether in the Office at church or in our schedule, our work, our food . . . , etc.

In short, I'm very happy, and I want you to be too. If there's one thing in the world that concerns me, it's my parents . . . and since coming here, I love you even more . . . God doesn't ask me to stop loving you, quite the opposite . . . He just tells me, "You shall love the Lord your God above all things."<sup>296</sup> As such, what He asks of me is to love Him first, and then my parents . . . I imagine you won't be jealous of such a great Lord.

The weather is splendid these days, and it hasn't rained since I got here . . . Every day I see the sunrise . . . Here, I won't have the whole of nature to enjoy . . . but I do have a sky that's so blue . . . that it gives glory to God. Above all, what reigns in this holy house is a splendid peace, the greatest that men can give . . . Such a great peace in God.

Well, my dearest father, don't forget about the problem of the live oaks, give us the specifics I've asked for right away.

I'm so glad that Jaime<sup>297</sup> comes by the house. He's one of the few real friends I've had; give him a hug for me, I'll write him one of these days.

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<sup>296</sup> See Lev 19:18; Deut 6:5; Luke 10:27.

<sup>297</sup> Jaime Suárez Ordóñez (d. 1969), one of Rafael's good friends. A pharmacist, he visited La Trapa frequently, especially during Holy Week, and hoped to become a Trappist himself (OC 213).

With nothing else to tell you now, give my aunt<sup>298</sup> many kisses for me, and all the love imaginable to you. With the Blessed Virgin's help, share it with the whole family. A big hug from your son, the newest novice of La Trapa,

*Br. María Rafael*

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<sup>298</sup> Petra Sánchez de la Campa y Tasquer (see Letter 2).

**33. to Rafael Arnáiz Sánchez de la Campa and Mercedes Barón Torres**

La Trapa, April 1, 1934

My dearest parents,

I imagine you've been waiting eagerly for the letter that I promised at the beginning of Lent. Everything comes and goes.

Today, Easter Sunday, Father Master summoned me, gave me some paper, and ordered me to write to you; of course, in this case I submit to holy obedience with great joy. Without further ado than a Hail Mary, so that God might enlighten my words, I will begin to tell you what I have been doing these forty days.

It's pretty quick to tell, since, trying to imitate Jesus in the desert, what I've been doing these forty days is fasting, prayer, and penance . . . and nothing else, because all that is quite enough. Don't think that long, sad faces abound during this time of the liturgical year, on account of the fast . . . none of that . . . We experience hunger, but joyfully, because it is for God's sake . . . and you can rest assured that I've never been so content getting up from the table as I was on certain Fridays, after having eaten nothing more than bread and water.

Of course, Lent in La Trapa is very hard, but it's manageable—just look at the proof: here I am, still alive to praise God more and more each day.

But the clouds parted, mourning has changed into delight and joy, the King of Heaven is praised by all the angels and a thunderous "alleluia" echoes in every corner of the world, resounding from the Catholic Church . . . I am proud to be a son of the

Church<sup>299</sup> and to be able to sing my praises to God too, here in the choir of a Trappist monastery.

Everything has its reward, in heaven and sometimes on earth too . . . Today Reverend Father Abbot<sup>300</sup> awarded the community an “indulgence”<sup>301</sup> for how well we’ve been singing these days: two fried eggs and a cup of coffee. As you can see, there are special things here in La Trapa too sometimes . . . The two fried eggs tasted like glory to me.

Now the summer schedule starts; we take an hour’s *siesta*, because instead of sleeping for seven hours, we sleep for six. We go out to work in the fields at six in the morning; it’s still pretty chilly out at that hour, because we’re in April, but by the time June and July come around, it’ll be pleasant. I am more content every day with being a Trappist monk; that is a priceless thing. How many things I would tell you if I had more

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<sup>299</sup> With her dying words, Saint Teresa of Ávila is famously said to have thanked God for making her a “daughter of the Church.” See Silverio de Santa Teresa, ed., *Procesos de beatificación y canonización de Santa Teresa de Jesús* (Burgos: Tipografía de «El Monte Carmelo», 1934), 105.

<sup>300</sup> *Reverend Father Abbot*: Dom Félix Alonso García (see Letter 5).

<sup>301</sup> *Indulgence*: A reprieve from the usual monastic fare at mealtimes (see Letter 31).

While the same term is used in English, monastic “indulgences” (in Spanish, *alivios*) are not related to the practice of performing acts of prayer and penance to remit punishment for sin (*indulgencias*).

time, but I'm short on it. I'll say it again, here I cannot do what I please, but rather what I am ordered to do.

Recently I've had to sing some readings from the pulpit at Matins<sup>302</sup> and I'm telling you I've never been in such a fix. My voice was trembling, singing either way too high or too low, tripping on my cape as I climbed up the stairs, in short, a real disaster. But it can't be helped; when I found myself up at the pulpit at three in the morning, looking out over all the shaved bald heads of the monks, the letters danced around the lectionary and I suddenly forgot how to pronounce Latin. I was striking out.

I've also been an altar server, or rather, a "candle snuffer," which is a job I like very much. Also, don't get me wrong, it has its importance. Here at La Trapa, any ceremony acquires a great importance; to light or stuff out a candle, one must follow all the rubrics laid out by the Laws of the Order . . . Everything is accounted for: the steps, the minutes, the bowing.

In church we are always ceremonial.<sup>303</sup> We do not speak for any reason or make any signs; we walk slowly, making no noise; we bow deeply to the Lord who is in the Tabernacle . . . In short, what divine worship ought to be and demands. This delights me. You know that I've never liked informalities anywhere, least of all at church. You could

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<sup>302</sup> *Matins*: The first hour of the Liturgy of the Hours, also known as Vigils or the Office of Readings.

<sup>303</sup> *Ceremonial*: "When moving about the church, one must do so *ceremonially*, that is, with the sleeves of the cowl hanging down; novices should keep their arms tilted down underneath their capes . . ." (Book of Usages, cited in OC 219; emphasis in the original).



say that Trappists are formed exclusively for God. First they form the soul, but then the body and its manners . . . and it's not that I wish to praise my Order above any other, but you could say that when it comes to celebrating worship, the Trappist way is the most elegant . . . How I would have liked for you all to see all the ceremonies of Holy Week.

The most insignificant details are arranged mathematically, as is the only way not to make a mess of things.

In any case, this life is so different from the one I led up until now that you can't imagine it, no matter how much I tell you . . . All the details of my life are in the book of *Usages*, which you have at home.<sup>304</sup> That is, in regards to the external aspects . . . in regards to my soul, what can I say? . . . God loves me so much! . . . I have so much peace in my soul, more than I could explain . . . With every day that goes by, I bless God even more, for having chosen me from among so many without my deserving it.

People have such a different idea of what a Trappist monastery is . . . How many of them would feel sorry for me, or even be frightened of my way of life, without even suspecting that here in the very renunciation of self and total surrender to God, one finds the only thing that makes life worth living . . . which is peace in God.

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<sup>304</sup> The *Usages* of the Cistercian Order of the Strict Observance govern the daily life of the monastery, including liturgical practices as Rafael notes here. For the *Usages* in place at San Isidro during Rafael's time, see *Usos de la Orden de los Cistercienses de la Estrecha Observancia* . . . (Westmalle, Belgium: [General Chapter of 1926], 1928), available in English as *Regulations of the Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance Published by the General Chapter of 1926* (Dublin: M.H. Gill & Sons, 1927).

My sole pursuit is loving God. That fills up everything, and every moment of the day.

During my free time I study singing and music theory, I practice the Divine Office, I read Saint Teresa, and in this way, in silence, whole days and months go by without even noticing . . . I am truly amazed that, despite waking up at two and going to bed at eight, I don't have time for anything.

Besides, you can't imagine how pleasant it is not to know anything about the world . . . In the two and a half months I've been here, I've learned just two pieces of news. The first one Father Abbot told us in chapter, when he told us one Friday in Lent that we'd be offering our procession around the cloister that day, singing the penitential psalms, so that the good side might win out in the government crisis<sup>305</sup> . . . but he told us nothing else, so I still don't know if it's been resolved.

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<sup>305</sup> *The government crisis*: The abbot most likely alluded to an ongoing legislative battle over the allocation of state funds to the Church (see María Concepción Marcos del Olmo, “La movilización eclesiástica en defensa de sus haberes: una reacción ante la política religiosa republicana (1931–1934),” *Diacronie* 41 [January 2020]: 1–21). While the issue was resolved in the short term with the promulgation of the pro-clerical Law of Clerical Pensions (*Ley de Haberes Pasivos del Clero*) on April 6, 1934, the question of state support for the Catholic Church would remain a key issue in the forthcoming Spanish Civil War and beyond.

The other one was from Father Sub-Master,<sup>306</sup> who for some reason told me that the king of Belgium<sup>307</sup> had died. That's all that has reached me this whole time . . . and I have no desire to know anything else.

What gives me the most joy is thinking about how this peace will be eternal. The day I die, all I will be doing is multiplying it on a scale that I can't even imagine.

Love for created beings ends at death . . . Desire for human glory fades away into nothing; only love for God grows with death . . . And so what I have, I have forever, the faith tells me so, whereas what I have left behind in the world is just on loan for a few years . . . and then . . . nothing.

That's why, my dearest parents, when I am so happy here in my monastery, merely a tunic and a white cape for my riches, seeing that one needs nothing more than that to be happy on this earth, I think of you. And I have the most ardent desire to be able to convey to you what I feel in those moments, to say to you and my brothers and sister, "Don't worry about the world and its affairs, don't let the future disturb you, leave it in God's hands; don't take an interest in earthly things, because they are a *waste of time*."<sup>308</sup> Turn to God and in Him you will find peace, first here on earth and then in heaven . . . "

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<sup>306</sup> *Father Sub-Master*: Father Francisco Díez Martínez (1907–1954). The sub-master assists the master of novices with the formation of the postulants and novices at the beginning of their religious life.

<sup>307</sup> *The king of Belgium*: Albert I, who died in a mountaineering accident on February 17, 1934.

<sup>308</sup> See 1 John 2:15–17; Col 3:2.

In certain moments, I want to impart my soul to you, my love for God, so that you might see that your son has found the true way . . . and, as the Gospel says,<sup>309</sup> a treasure, one that he has set about digging up without a moment's hesitation . . . But at the same time, since I am not selfish, I want to call my brothers and sister<sup>310</sup> and tell them, "Come with me, and you'll see what I'm telling you is true . . . Seek God and you will find Him, and once you've found Him, know that nothing and no one will take Him from you."

Well, there you have my sermon. Truth be told I don't know how I come up with them. The day you come to see me I'll give you a little lecture, the whole bit.

Now we're going to Vespers, since it's about four.

I think I'm getting used to the hood . . . or rather, I'm getting used to everything. The body is a creature of habit, and one must simply learn to master it.

Do what Father Master told you, and don't come yet, because it's still cold in the guesthouse but in the spring it'll be very pleasant.

Just now Father Master gave me a letter from my mother and told me to answer it; so I shall.

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<sup>309</sup> See Matt 13:44.

<sup>310</sup> Two of Rafael's three siblings did enter religious life. His brother Luis Fernando entered the Burgos monastery of the Carthusians, an order of monks founded by Saint Bruno of Cologne in 1084. His sister Mercedes joined the Ursulines, an order of cloistered nuns dedicated to education and founded by Saint Angela Merici in 1535.

First of all, I'm not a friar, for the record . . . I'm a monk, which is not the same thing. Secondly, my head isn't behind a hood, but rather my hood is behind my head . . . which is not the same thing.

What you shouldn't do is worry about whether my hands are using a paintbrush or a hoe . . . in the eyes of God it's all the same, so long as they are being used for His greater glory . . . and He can be praised through anything . . . With the hoe in the fields, with the pen at home . . . with the thurible<sup>311</sup> in church; so long as you don't put them down . . . so that one day you can present yourself before God and, showing Him your hands covered in calluses and chilblains,<sup>312</sup> say to Him, "Lord, the works I have carried out are poor and insignificant, my hands have labored poorly . . . but, Lord, I did it all in Your name, and every time my body bent down over the ground to earn my daily bread, my heart was lifted up to You so that I might someday gain heaven." It is a great consolation to have calluses for love of God.

I am infinitely grateful that you see God's will in that of my superiors, for it is so . . . Take good care of my aunt, for the sick and the elderly are a wellspring for charity . . . Do it all with patience, with affection, tolerating rudeness and dirty looks at times . . . and if our sacrifices are not recognized or understood by others, all the better, for thus they are more pleasing to God, whose sacrifice on the Cross was not recognized either . . . and

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<sup>311</sup> *Thurible*: A censer used to burn incense, often carried by an altar server.

<sup>312</sup> *Chilblains*: Blisters caused by the cold. Unlike most buildings in the 1930s, the monastery did not have heating, and the winters in Palencia are wet, cold, and long.

He told us Himself that if we gave a cup of water in His name, we would rejoice in Him in heaven.<sup>313</sup>

Charity, what a beautiful virtue! In it is contained patience, self-denial, meekness, gentleness . . . well, in a word, holiness. As such, seize the opportunities that God places within your reach, and don't squander them, for soon enough we will have to account for our actions before God.

Now I'm going to deal with Fernando. All he has to do is not make a fool of himself and follow his diet down to the letter, and if he wants to get well, he should come to La Trapa. I promise him that here there's not even the slightest chance of liver attacks . . . Oh, it's difficult? Yes, I know, but if he won't do it for his health, he should do it for love of God, and I'm sure he'd be cured.

I can personally testify that one can live on beans, potatoes, boiled beets, wine, and bread alone . . . And if he's good, and behaves himself, they might give him a couple of eggs and a bit of coffee every two or three months.

Of course at first it takes a while to get used to it . . . and sometimes it makes you cry.

I remember the third day I was in the monastery. They hadn't given me anything other than white beans one day, black beans the next, and pinto beans the next, and since I am a soft, stupid glutton, I was going upstairs from the refectory to the novitiate thinking about how that was going to be my food *for the rest of my life*, and I started crying cats and dogs. And now, when I remember that, I start laughing, and the days they

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<sup>313</sup> Matt 10:42; Mark 9:41.

don't give me beans I miss them . . . And it's true that our brother the cook works miracles with a handful of the aforementioned legumes and a bit of salt and water, or at least they seem like miracles to me. I wouldn't trade my bowl, my silent meal, and my joyful heart for the best menu on offer at Lhardy<sup>314</sup> . . . So, Fernandillo, cheer up and play nice with the vegetables.

I haven't heard a word from Juan.<sup>315</sup> I'm glad he comes by the house, he's a good kid and I love him very much.

I'm also glad that my letters make you happy, even if my words fall too short to fully express what I'm feeling. I hope that, in spite of it all, you understand me perfectly.

You've asked me for details of my life, but you already know them all. In any case, here they are.

I've learned how to shave with a razor without cutting myself. My sleeves are way too short for me. Today we ate white beans, milk, and walnuts . . . All through Lent they took away the milk and dessert, leaving only the beans . . . At night they gave us a plate of potatoes or lentils and six ounces of bread . . . and at six in the morning, half an ounce of chocolate and one ounce of bread. That was the hardest thing about Lent for me, since on the days we got up at one, when the Divine Office went on a bit longer, we'd be fasting for six or seven hours at a time, and then afterwards they'd give you a tiny piece of bread the size of two *duros* . . . well, you go hungry, that's all . . . Now we take all the

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<sup>314</sup> *Lhardy*: An elegant French restaurant in Madrid.

<sup>315</sup> *Juan*: Rafael's close friend Juan Vallauré (see Letter 9).

bread we want. In spite of it all, I'm in stupendous health, and giving infinite thanks to God who gives me the strength for everything.

More details: I know how to peel potatoes now, with all my typical elegance. When you read in the lives of the saints about how they devoted themselves to humble duties, as if it were a remarkable thing, you think nothing of it . . . but in reality, it's no big deal knowing how to handle a broom, it's all relative. Back home, if I were to put an apron on and help the housekeeper wash the stairs, it would have attracted attention . . . just as it would here if someone were to sit in the refectory and give a little clap to call over a waiter . . . Here we all sweep and help each other with everything . . . Last week my esteemed Father Master was serving food . . . This morning a respectable priest with white hair<sup>316</sup> helped me wrap chocolates, and later I helped him at the conventual Mass.

So, life at La Trapa is not well understood, because it is compared with the world, but in truth, life in the world is completely different.

At work, at mealtimes, and at rest, and in the cemetery, we are all equal . . . even though there is a pyramid from Reverend Father Abbot down to the newest novice, on which each of us has his place, his role, and his dignity. That is, in a Cistercian monastery, hierarchy and equality are blended together: it is a perfect society, as much as can be expected among men.

When you sing Gounod's<sup>317</sup> *Ave Maria*, don't think of me at all. It's better for you to think of the Virgin; you'll get more out of it that way, and it'll sound better.

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<sup>316</sup> Father Eugenio (Juan) Díez Ubierna (1873–1940).

<sup>317</sup> Charles Gounod (1813–1893), French composer.



No memory of me should make you sad, on the contrary . . . let's not waste tears.

Anytime you remember me and are sad, think of the Virgin Mary, for She too had to sacrifice a lot. I am glad that my father didn't stop by, because if they didn't let him see me, it would have been hard on him and on me too. It's good not to force things. You can imagine that, naturally, the novitiate is the most secluded part of religious life.

I would have a lot of things to say to you too, and I wanted to pour my heart out on paper, but you'll have to be content with my good wishes. I want to finish this letter now, as it's going on longer than it should, so I'll leave it until next time.

Give out all the good wishes you'd like on my behalf. All my love, your son,

*Br. M. Rafael*

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### 34. to Rafael Arnáiz Sánchez de la Campa

La Trapa, April 8, 1934

My dearest father,

You are never a bother, no matter what you wish to discuss. To answer your question, I took the proof of payment for the 750 *pesetas* to the major's office at Cuartel de la Montaña,<sup>318</sup> Regiment of Sappers and Miners;<sup>319</sup> I believe they gave me a receipt which, if I kept it, you will find in one of the white envelopes where I put all my Madrid documents . . . I don't know where the envelopes are . . . but in any case, if you don't find the receipt among my papers, I don't think it will be difficult to get them to give you a duplicate . . . since they have the proof of payment there . . . If you need to get in touch with one of the soldiers, take the matter up with Mr. Luis Díaz Iglesias, who is a non-commissioned officer,<sup>320</sup> and a very good person who liked me a lot. I can tell you nothing more about the matter at hand.

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<sup>318</sup> *Cuartel de la Montaña*: These barracks, constructed in the nineteenth century, were located on a hill in western Madrid known as La Montaña de Príncipe Pío. In 1936, it was the site of the coup d'état that led to the Spanish Civil War. The area was turned into a park in the 1960s.

<sup>319</sup> *Regiment of Sappers and Miners*: The formal name (*Regimiento de Zapadores-Minadores*) of the Spanish army's regiment of combat engineers, formed in 1802.

<sup>320</sup> *Non-commissioned officer*: Rafael refers to Díaz Iglesias as a "*sub-oficial*," indicating that he earned his position through enlisted service. His rank at the time was *brigada* (the

I suppose you already have in your possession a long letter that I wrote you the other day, giving you details of my life. I have nothing to add to it. I continue to pray for you, which is the only way I can pay back some of what I owe you all.

Before coming to the monastery, I dreamed of finishing my degree so that I could use my first earnings to help my father out . . . and I used to think about what I'd do with the thousand *pesetas* I'd earn from my first project . . . Of course, they wouldn't be for me . . . my parents came first . . . But things have changed . . . The future architect has become a monk; projects for human glory have become a desire for the glory of God . . . And so I have changed from a student into a novice. My ambitions to earn money will become a vow of poverty . . . but don't worry, what hasn't changed, and never will, is that I am your son. So while I can't help you with money I don't earn, you can be assured that the first prayers that rose up from me, after taking on my new state in life, were for my father and mother . . . My earnings aren't meant for this earth, so you don't have the pleasure of saying, "We have a son whose worth astonishes the world. His reputation precedes him among men, by whom he is highly regarded; he stores up treasures,<sup>321</sup> from which he supports his parents . . ."

Instead of that whole magnificent song and dance, which I'll never be able to provide, since my merits are few and far between, you can exclaim, "We have a son whom nobody knows. He is poorer than a church mouse . . . he is a Trappist who lives in

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eighth enlisted grade), which is roughly equivalent to a master sergeant in the U.S. Army (Prieto 446).

<sup>321</sup> *Stores up treasures*: see Matt 6:19–21.

the peace and grace of God in his monastery. He does not help us materially, because he cannot, for he earns nothing more than his keep, but in exchange, he is storing up for his parents treasures that human beings cannot appreciate, because they know nothing about them. One day, before God, he will be able to offer up his parents and brothers and sister. He will say to them: ‘My sacrifices have been accepted by God, and I have offered them to Him in your name. So while you thought that your son would be good for nothing, he was at the feet of Jesus, interceding for his parents.’” So, as you can see, in one way or another, I am keeping the commandment to honor my father and mother.

I’m so sorry about Aunt Petra,<sup>322</sup> I can imagine the scene from here . . . I don’t want to annoy you as I did the other day by telling you to have patience . . . I’m sure you already have the necessary amount . . . Try to attend to her spiritual matters as much as possible, so that she doesn’t give you a scare one of these days. Though it seems irresponsible to me at her age, it’s not our business, but rather God’s. All we can do is provide the necessary means.

Father Eufrasio,<sup>323</sup> the superior of the Carmelite Fathers, told me that he’d come by the house sometime. Has he? You can trust him, he’s very good.

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<sup>322</sup> Rafael’s great-aunt, who was living with his parents at the time; see Letter 2.

<sup>323</sup> *Padre Eufrasio*: Father Eufrasio del Niño Jesús Barredo Fernández, prior of the Discalced Carmelites at Oviedo, and Rafael’s former confessor (OC 209). He later became a martyr of the Spanish Civil War and was beatified in 2007.

How did Fernando's<sup>324</sup> retreat go? I've asked God to use it to make him very good.

I have nothing new to tell you . . . Today, which is Sunday, it's raining and the sky is gloomy; it reminds me of those gray Asturian<sup>325</sup> days.

Well, that's all for today; I don't want to go on too long as I did the other day. With a pen in my hand, I never rest, and the sad thing is I say nothing of substance. The one detail of the day that I'll share is that the organ stopped working. The newest novice is the one who has to operate it by hand,<sup>326</sup> so I've spent the day raising my prayers to God with my own strength, and now my arms are sore.

I'll also say, in case you're interested, that it's still raining . . . And . . . nothing else in particular. I'll just repeat that you aren't bothering me, as you say in your letter, when you write me about these matters . . . You have to keep in mind that I'm not dead yet.

Of course, I'm happy not talking about *pesetas*, and it's hard to believe that my letters aren't to ask you for money as they used to be. All those incomprehensible

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<sup>324</sup> *Fernando*: Rafael's youngest brother.

<sup>325</sup> Rafael was raised in Oviedo, the capital of the province of Asturias in northwestern Spain.

<sup>326</sup> It was a custom at San Isidro that the newest novice was in charge of this routine maintenance. Normally the pipe organ relied on an electrical current to fill its bellows with air, but when the power was out, it had to be pumped up manually.

combinations of subtraction and addition, totals and deductions, just so that later, in sum, I could panhandle my father . . . all that's history now.

Well, I'll leave you now, I still have a lot to do, like the Stations of the Cross and praying the Rosary to our Holy Mother . . . Listen, don't stop praying it, even though I'm not there. I often remember my mother's velocity. Now I pray it alone, but always as if I were praying it with you, and I believe that the Virgin receives your prayers and mine at the same time, even if they are offered at different times . . .

Truly, it is a great consolation for Christians to know that we are so united . . . Where there is faith, there is no distance in time or space, no parents, no children; only one thing exists, and that is God, and there we shall all end up sooner or later.

A million hugs from your son,

*Br. M. Rafael*

#### IV. Illness and Exile

*Writings after Rafael's first exit from the monastery, June 1934–October 1935*

When Rafael left the monastery in May 1934 to seek medical treatment for his diabetes, the condition had just begun to be treatable.<sup>327</sup> In these letters, he details his insulin shots and nutrition plan with a hopeful spirit, looking forward to a quick return. He even noted the spiritual benefits of a break from monastic formation, writing to his uncle about a need for detachment:

What's happening to me is very simple; in short, God loves me very much . . . I was happy in La Trapa. I considered myself the most fortunate of mortals, having managed to detach myself from earthly creatures, aspiring to nothing more than God . . . But I still had one thing left: love for La Trapa. So Jesus, who is very

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<sup>327</sup> The use of insulin as a treatment for diabetes was discovered in 1921 and implemented in 1923, “transform[ing] an acute, rapidly fatal illness into a chronic disease with serious long-term complications” (Robert B. Tattersall, “The History of Diabetes Mellitus,” in *Textbook of Diabetes* [John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 2010], 10). Because the only type of insulin treatment available at the time was short-acting, treatment required multiple daily injections and constant monitoring to avoid hypoglycemia (*ibid.*, 14). Long-acting insulin treatment was invented in 1936, the same year that the distinction between type 1 diabetes (which responds only to insulin treatment) and type 2 diabetes (which also responds to dietary management) was discovered. Rafael had the former type.

selfish when it comes to His children's love, wanted me to detach myself from my beloved monastery too, even if just temporarily.<sup>328</sup>

All summer, Rafael continued his correspondence with the monastery, even visiting once when his health allowed. Reflecting on the value of the monastic vocation to which he eagerly hoped to return, he began a manuscript he called *The Trappist's Apologia* on September 19, 1934:

What would happen to the world without prayer . . . if the one thing that pleased God, the one thing that stopped Him from doing away with humanity, were to disappear? Why is the world surprised, then, that some people, full of good will, should devote themselves to kneeling on the ground and lift their hearts to God? Does the world think they are useless? The world calls them selfish and crazy and says that they're wasting their time . . . but it's not so; those who devote themselves to prayer are the only people who know how to use time well . . . Talking to other people and arguing over trivialities with them . . . that's the real waste of time . . . Someday they'll see.<sup>329</sup>

Rafael stopped work on the manuscript when he and his family suddenly found themselves surrounded by the violence of the Revolution of 1934, which began with an uprising led by miners' unions in Asturias on October 5. After the deposition of the monarchy in 1931 and the subsequent establishment of the Second Spanish Republic,

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<sup>328</sup> Letter 35.

<sup>329</sup> Manuscript 51.



Spain had come to be governed under a typical parliamentary system with a president and prime minister. However, the political division that had led to the tension between the monarchy and the republic in the first place continued, bubbling over most prominently in the 1933 elections. Despite an electoral victory by the right-wing coalition, President Niceto Alcalá-Zamora refused to appoint a member of the winning party as Prime Minister and waited over a year before appointing any of its members to cabinet positions.<sup>330</sup> The socialist uprising in October 1934 was launched nominally in response to those appointments, although the Asturian miners' strike also proceeded from broad industrial discontent.<sup>331</sup> However, the uprising also included anticlerical violence, murdering priests and religious and destroying churches and convents in Oviedo and beyond.<sup>332</sup>

After the violence ceased in Oviedo, where Rafael was staying with his parents, he went to stay at the Burgos residence of his aunt and uncle, Pepita Conde Merino and Álvaro Barón Torres.<sup>333</sup> From there, he briefly reflected on his experience:

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<sup>330</sup> Paul Preston, *The Spanish Civil War: Reaction, Revolution, and Revenge*, Revised and Expanded Edition (New York: W.W. Norton, 2007), 66–77.

<sup>331</sup> Helen Graham, *The Spanish Civil War: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 15.

<sup>332</sup> For example, the Dominican chapel where Rafael attended daily Adoration was burned, and six seminarians were killed (OC 366). They were beatified in 2019 as Blessed Ángel Cuartas Cristóbal and companions.

<sup>333</sup> OC 363.

I won't attempt a summary of the events of those nine days of anarchocommunist that we residents of Oviedo suffered through . . . It was so terrifying that I remember nothing but the apartment building, where it seemed as though we were all going crazy; the unrelenting thunder of machine guns, rifles, and dynamite; enormous fires that lit up the sky with an intense glow the color of blood; and revolutionaries constantly threatening us with their rifles and pistols.<sup>334</sup>

Rafael's own writing reflects the difficult position of Spanish Catholics during this period. With indifference toward poverty on the right, and anticlerical violence on the left, Rafael found himself disgusted by the situation in Asturias and Spain more broadly:

If the idea of God is taken from the poor, they have nothing else left; their desperation is justifiable, their hatred for the rich is natural, their desire for revolution and anarchy is logical. And if the idea of God is a nuisance to the rich, and they do not heed the precepts of the Gospel and the teachings of Jesus . . . then they shouldn't complain. If their selfishness hinders them from drawing near to the poor, they should not be surprised when the latter plan to take what they have by force.<sup>335</sup>

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<sup>334</sup> Manuscript 56.

<sup>335</sup> Manuscript 51.

After witnessing the violence of the uprising, Rafael fell into what he referred to as a “serious nervous breakdown”<sup>336</sup> and stopped communicating with the monastery altogether. He finally replied to one of his novice master’s letters in February, revealing his increasing desolation:

Though I’ve owed my brothers a letter, my moral state and mood has been such that, as I’m telling you, I haven’t been able to write, and I’ve preferred to just cry a bit without anybody finding out. [. . .] I’d be lying if I said I haven’t been suffering; blessed be God who wills it thus. I find myself so far from my monastery, which I long for more ardently with each passing day. For me, that is my life, and I see that time is passing, but I don’t see what God wants from me . . .

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Over the course of the year, as his diabetes proved a chronic challenge, Rafael revisited his discernment of his monastic vocation. He remained certain that God was calling him to La Trapa, but began to wonder if it might be in a different capacity—as an oblate, or non-vowed member, rather than a monk. In October 1935, he visited his spiritual advisor, Sor Pilar García, the abbess of the Poor Clares at Ávila, to ask her advice.<sup>338</sup> Soon after, he wrote to the abbot to ask for re-admission in this new role. As we will see in the next section, his preparation for the oblature both humiliated and reinvigorated him, no longer attached to either his worldly or his monastic ambitions.

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<sup>336</sup> Letter 61.

<sup>337</sup> Letter 61.

<sup>338</sup> Letter 63.

**35. to Leopoldo Barón**<sup>339</sup>Oviedo, June 3, 1934<sup>340</sup>

My dearest Uncle Polín,

I was waiting for your letter, I knew you'd be the first one to write me . . . May God return to you the consolation I received from it. Now, in turn, I will give you the news you've asked for. I didn't do it before only because it was physically impossible, my eyesight is very poor at the moment and I get worn out quickly. I have to use my father's glasses for everything, and they're for farsightedness . . . The doctor says it'll pass when I am stronger.<sup>341</sup>

What's happening to me is very simple; in short, God loves me very much . . . I was happy in La Trapa. I considered myself the most fortunate of mortals, having managed to detach myself from earthly creatures, aspiring to nothing more than God . . . But I still had one thing left: love for La Trapa. So Jesus, who is very selfish when it

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<sup>339</sup> This is the first letter that Rafael wrote after leaving La Trapa on May 26, 1934, gravely ill with diabetes. After being admitted to the infirmary on May 24, the infirmarian recommended that Rafael return to his parents' home in Oviedo for more serious treatment. His father arrived at the monastery on May 25, and they departed together the next morning (OC 234).

<sup>340</sup> From Letter 35 through Dedication 60, Rafael was 23 years old.

<sup>341</sup> Poor eyesight is a symptom of diabetes; in Rafael's case, it was temporary.

comes to His children's love, wanted me to detach myself from my beloved monastery too, even if just temporarily.

This trial that I am enduring is difficult, very difficult, but I am not shaken, nor afraid, nor have I ceased to trust in God. More and more, I see His hand in everything that happens to me, and truly, it is so sweet to abandon yourself to such a good Father. There are so many things I would tell you if I were with you. You talk of my troubles, but I say to you, blessed is the one who suffers for Christ, and woe to the one who sees his desires fulfilled on earth.<sup>342</sup>

The congratulations you sent were given to me by my confessor<sup>343</sup> in La Trapa with tears in his eyes. If only you knew what that was like, Uncle Polín . . . I have left behind such profound affection . . . If you could see how we Trappists love one another in silence . . . Nobody knows what it is to cry for a brother as he leaves, a brother to whom you have not said a word in four months.

Well, when we see each other we'll talk at length, I wouldn't know how to express my feelings to you in a letter. What I will do is explain my illness to you in detail.

In four months of novitiate, not even one bad headache; stupendous health, loving life . . . Then weeding season starts. First few days in the fields are good, praising God among the wheat; one day I feel very tired; the next day even more so; the next I can't

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<sup>342</sup> See Luke 6:20–26.

<sup>343</sup> *My confessor*: Father Teófilo Sandoval Fernández (1902–2000), who would later become the vice-postulator of Rafael's cause for canonization.

take it anymore and, while my brothers work, I sit down . . . I am exhausted. Two or three days before I eliminated a tremendous amount of urine, there were nights when I got up six times . . . Father Master doesn't let me go out into the field; I stay in the house, washing lettuce; the next day, after the Virgin's Matins,<sup>344</sup> at three in the morning, I can't be in choir any longer and I go up to bed. The next day, Rev. Fr.<sup>345</sup> comes up to the novitiate and sends me to the infirmary for a few days.

The infirmarian<sup>346</sup> analyzes my urine and gets worried. The doctor<sup>347</sup> arrives and says that I have to get into treatment immediately and it's impossible at the monastery. The next day my father arrives with the car. I arrived in Oviedo at four in the afternoon, and by six they had given me my first injection of "insulin," which they say is the only thing that cures it.<sup>348</sup>

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<sup>344</sup> *The Virgin's Matins*: matins from the Little Office (see Dedication 24).

<sup>345</sup> *Rev. Fr.*: The abbot, Dom Félix Alonso García (see Letter 5).

<sup>346</sup> *The infirmarian*: Father Vicente Pardo Feliú (1883–1955) oversaw the community infirmary.

<sup>347</sup> *The doctor*: Clemente Cilleruelo y Arizón was the local doctor who served the monastery.

<sup>348</sup> Insulin was first used in the treatment of diabetes just twelve years earlier, in 1922. It was still being studied and would not have been as well known to the average person in Rafael's time as it is today.

I have high levels of sugar, and I had acetone.<sup>349</sup> I'm on a diet where I have to weigh everything I eat, gram by gram; I'm terribly hungry, and so weak that reading makes me dizzy and walking makes me tired, I can hardly see . . . It has all been a matter of six or seven days, but there have been days when I've lost two kilos.<sup>350</sup>

They do an analysis twice a day, and they give me three injections a day too . . . Some real medical revelry. I'm not in any pain or discomfort; I spend all day sitting down not doing anything.

I brought my habit with me, but I haven't put it on.

This illness is a very long one, and I don't know when I'll be able to go back to my monastery. And I don't know when it will be, but God tells me that I will die a Trappist; now all I can do is put my life in His hands, and I promise you that I have. I can do nothing more, and besides, I know that the Blessed Virgin has not abandoned me.

You can't imagine how sorry I am about Pilar,<sup>351</sup> but there's no need to worry. God gives health and God takes it away . . . and He knows what He is doing. I've been at heaven's door (forgive my presumption), just a matter of hours away, and nevertheless, God said to me: Wait . . . and I'll wait as long as God wants me to.

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<sup>349</sup> *Acetone*: High levels of acetone in the blood and urine are a common first symptom in previously undiagnosed diabetics.

<sup>350</sup> *Two kilos*: Equivalent to four and a half pounds.

<sup>351</sup> *Pilar*: Rafael's cousin, a daughter of Leopoldo Barón and María Osorio. She was sick at the time.

I hope to see you when you come to Covadonga,<sup>352</sup> so that there, at the feet of the Virgin, we might speak of God . . . Neither your troubles nor mine are worth talking about. What difference does health make over sickness, or wealth over poverty, when you have God?

Oh, Uncle Polín, how great the Lord is! And how little are we. I've changed a lot these past four months. God has spoiled me so much, and made me see things that I didn't see before.

Well, that's all for today. Another day I'll write you with more details, but don't worry about my health, there's no need. Give Aunt María and the cousins a big hug for me, and all my love to you as your nephew and brother in Jesus and Mary,

*Rafael*

If you have some time, send me a quick note.

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<sup>352</sup> *Covadonga*: A Marian pilgrimage site in Asturias, a short journey from where Rafael was staying at his parents' home in Oviedo.



**36. to Fr. Marcelo León**

Oviedo, June 11, 1934

My dear and respected Father Master,

I beg your forgiveness for my tardiness in writing you with news of my health, but a sick man can be forgiven for this small transgression.

I continue to improve, though very slowly, and now I am recovering the strength I'd lost . . . These last few days, I've been able to go receive the Lord. Of course, I can't go on foot, despite the short distance between my house and the church. This afternoon I'll go out for the first time, to go for a drive.

I'm still on a very strict diet, scrupulously weighing the amounts, in order to find out the number of "carbohydrates" that my body can tolerate and correlate that with the amount of "insulin" they have to give me . . . They do two urine analyses per day and they give me three injections of "insulin" per day too. I'm telling you, Father, I'm hungrier than I was during Lent.

The doctor says I'll have to keep doing this all summer, but that I'll recover . . . That's what I want, so that I can return to my monastery, even if some time has to pass before I can follow the normal diet at La Trapa . . . Meanwhile, everything is in God's hands. He is the one who can resolve it all, and I am in His hands.

My mood varies . . . All this was so sudden, and so fast, that I've been stupefied for days, without realizing what was going on inside me, just bewildered. This lifestyle change is so radical, it wouldn't be like this if it weren't . . . I thought that God was taking me up to heaven, but it seems that the hour of my liberation has not yet come, and

that He wants me here on earth for a little longer still . . . May His will be done and not my own.<sup>353</sup>

When I went to La Trapa, I surrendered to Him all I had and all I possessed: my soul and my body . . . My surrender was absolute and total. It is utterly just, then, that God should now do with me as He wishes and as He pleases, without a single complaint or rebellious move on my part.

God is my absolute master, and I am His servant, who keeps quiet and obeys . . . Sometimes I wonder, “What does God want from me?” . . . But as David says, “Who is man to know God’s designs?”<sup>354</sup> Therefore, the best thing to do is close your eyes and let Him carry you, for He knows what is good for us.

I was too happy at La Trapa; the trial He has required of me is a hard one, but with His help I will come out on the other side of it, and here, there, or wherever I am, I will keep going forward without losing ground. “I have put my hand to the plow and cannot look back.”<sup>355</sup>

God not only accepted my sacrifice, when I left the world, but He has also asked me for a still greater sacrifice, which was returning to it . . . For how long? . . . That’s up to God. He gives health, and He takes it away . . . We human beings can do nothing more than trust in His divine providence, knowing that what He does is well done, even if *at*

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<sup>353</sup> See Matt 6:10; 26:39–42.

<sup>354</sup> Psalm 8:4: “What are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?” Compare Isa 40:13; Rom 11:34; 1 Cor 2:16.

<sup>355</sup> See Luke 9:62.

*first glance* it might go against our desires. But I believe that true perfection is to have no desire other than “may His will be done in us.”<sup>356</sup>

God, in His infinite wisdom, does not ask us what we desire in order to give it to us immediately, because generally we don’t know what we need for our salvation. Rather, working far above our reason and the designs of His creatures, He carries us, brings us along, and tests us in a thousand ways . . . and we say, “Lord, why are you doing this? . . .” and it seems that God responds, “Trust Me. You are like children, and in order to reach the kingdom of My Father, you cannot go it alone, nor do you know the way; I will take you there . . . Follow me, even if it goes against your desires . . .” The kingdom of God is subjected to violence<sup>357</sup> . . . and to reach the end, we must not go by the way we choose, for, children that we are in the eyes of God, we hardly even know how to walk . . . “Trust Me,” Jesus says, “And I will lead you.”

My dear Father Master . . . I am letting Jesus lead me . . . When I was happier . . . When I saw my future as a Cistercian monk clearly before me, when I desired nothing more from the world and my *only desire* was to be among my brothers in the religious life until death . . . Jesus says, “Now, an illness, and get out” . . . Well all right, *fiat*<sup>358</sup> . . . What else can I do?

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<sup>356</sup> See Matt 6:10; 26:39,42.

<sup>357</sup> See Matt 11:12; Luke 16:16.

<sup>358</sup> *Fiat*: From the Latin version of Mary’s words in Luke 1:38, *Let it be with me according to your word.*

And so, Father, you can see that I am at peace. The circumstances in which I find myself do not depend on me. Therefore, as it is God who has taken me out of the novitiate, if He wants to, He will be the one to lead me back there.

I have so many things to say to the priests and the novices and the oblates . . . But I think my silence will be more eloquent than anything I could say in a letter . . . I've left so much sincere affection behind in La Trapa, and it will never be forgotten. I won't ask you to give my regards to anyone in particular, because I'd have to start listing off the whole community; although I am here bodily, spiritually I am very often in choir.

I get up late, I go to bed late, I spend all day at home doing nothing because reading strains my eyes quite a bit and I can't do it, and I don't have the energy for anything else . . . I go through all the armchairs in the house so as not to sit in the same one all the time, and so as not to keep secrets from you, I'll confess that I've started smoking again.

I don't put on my habit, in order not to call attention to myself. I put it away carefully; for me, it was a consolation to bring it with me.

I don't receive anyone. The first few days, that was because I was too out of it. Now, it's because what they have to say doesn't interest me a whit, as you will easily understand. And while there are people who truly care for me, there's also a lot of curiosity. You don't see a Trappist every day.

The other day Father Felipe<sup>359</sup> came by the house, I hadn't met him before. He had come to see his family and on the way he stopped by to meet me. He's very kind and must be very good.

I have nothing more to tell you . . . Forgive me for how rushed these lines have been, but you know how I write—a lot, fast, and badly, but that's me. I'll save the formal letters for somebody who isn't my Father Master.

I trust in the prayers that the novices and oblates will be offering to the Blessed Virgin on my behalf; naturally, I have more faith in them than I do in the doctors, may God forgive them for making me endure so much hunger . . . I'm telling you, Father, it's dreadful. It is, after all, a characteristic of the illness.

With nothing more to add, give my regards to Rev. Fr. Abbot and convey my sincere affection to the novices. Awaiting your blessing and your prayers, your novice,

*Brother María Rafael*

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<sup>359</sup> Father Felipe (Joaquín) Álvarez Vázquez (1876–1955). He had been a priest of the diocese of Oviedo before entering San Isidro in 1910. He then served as the chaplain of the Trappist nuns at Alloz, in Navarre, and later spent several years in the monastery at Oseira, in Galicia.

**37. to Leopoldo Barón**

Oviedo, June 17, 1934

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

Dearest Uncle Polín,

To answer your letter, I'm doing much better, thanks be to God, and according to the doctor this goes very quickly. True, the medicines I'm using aren't the most common, but the prayers of my brother novices are worth more than all the doctors and medicines put together . . . In any case, it's going to take me at least the summer, and afterwards I'll start a diet much like the one at La Trapa, to see how my body responds to it, and then hopefully I'll be able to continue my life as a "poor Trappist," as you say.

I trust deeply in God. Surely He will carry me back to the monastery; I think of nothing else all day . . . The choir . . . the fields . . . the silence, the joyful peace of the cemetery . . . my brothers, my habit, my cell . . . my Tabernacle of La Trapa . . . everything I won with sacrifices and tears collapsed over something so insignificant as a bit of sugar in the blood . . . How great God is, Uncle Polín, who uses the smallest, most insignificant things to show us our own smallness and wretchedness, and to make us understand that we are nothing without Him.

I was too happy at La Trapa. I can promise you that while the life there is hard, very hard, God is so close by that you don't even notice the austerity of the Rule. I breathed in joy through every pore . . . God was my one and only desire, and I felt Him so close to me that I forgot about everything else.

It's also true that, at first, it made me cry sometimes. After all, I am a human creature with a heart and feelings, and some things cannot be helped.

I remember my first days as a postulant, when we went out to the fields in a single file line . . . Every novice carrying his hoe, and I was last . . . We set out for the vineyard in silence . . . it was terribly cold . . . the ground was hard from the frost, and on top of all that, I was so tired I could hardly stay awake . . . The work boss<sup>360</sup> divided up the tasks, we crossed ourselves and prayed a Hail Mary, and we got to work.

Well, more than once in those days I watered the clods of dirt that I pulled up with my hoe with teardrops the size of oranges. I recovered quickly, remembering the question that our holy father Saint Bernard would ask himself: “Bernard, what have you come for?”<sup>361</sup> I would then redouble my efforts, and if anyone had been very close to me, they'd have heard me sing something that goes like this: “*Virgen del santo Recuerdo, que nunca te podré olvidar.*”<sup>362</sup> For me that was the cure . . . singing to the Virgin . . . If only

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<sup>360</sup> *Work boss*: A term in use among Trappists to refer to the monk or nun who organizes the community's work and assigns tasks for the day.

<sup>361</sup> “He constantly said in his heart and even often on his lips, ‘Bernard, Bernard, what have you come for?’” (William of Saint-Thierry, Arnold of Bonneval, and Geoffrey of Auxerre, *The First Life of Bernard of Clairvaux*, trans. Hilary Costello, CF 36 [Collegeville, MN: Cistercian Publications, 2015], 22).

<sup>362</sup> The first line of a hymn to the Virgin Mary (OC 257), lit. “Our Lady of Remembrance, I'll never be able to forget you.” The Spanish Jesuits had a particular devotion to Our Lady of Remembrance, for whom their most famous school (Colegio

you knew how Our Lady has treated me . . . ! We will never fully grasp, Uncle Polín, how much Mary loves us.

Another day I broke down crying again, you know why? Every time I remember, I laugh . . . Well it's simple. One morning at five o'clock, hunger (it was Lent), exhaustion, and cold all got together, and between the three of them they gave my miserable body, so accustomed to comfort, such a thrashing that it began to produce tears . . . I can assure you that it is difficult to master one's flesh, but with God's great assistance, which He lends to the Trappists, you can make of it whatever you wish . . . I am convinced that without a very special grace, a Trappist could not go on living.

Well, just so you know everything, when I was most moved to tears was . . . at my mother's letters.

I tell you all this so that you might grasp the misery of your nephew, who, despite his great love for God, surrendered himself to Him without as much generosity as he ought to have . . . But he got through postulancy and then came the novitiate, and though his body kept causing him trouble, he didn't listen to it anymore . . . I was after one thing and one thing only; I wanted to draw close to God. And in truth, I didn't do anything, it was God who drew close to me. I offered myself to Him, He accepted me . . . and as the proof of it, He has sent me back to the world with an illness . . . Blessed be God! Now what I ask of Him is to let me recover, so that I can return to the monastery with my brothers. I ask Him for health so that I can give it right back to Him again . . . I have no

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Nuestra Señora del Recuerdo, Madrid) was named. Rafael may have learned the hymn as a schoolchild, as he attended Jesuit schools throughout his youth.



other use for it. Among human beings, things aren't so great, as you say . . . Of course Trappists are human beings too, but . . . ? . . . you know what I mean.

I have one thing to say that you'll be happy to hear. You and I, before my *escape* from the world, didn't know what a Trappist monastery was. We suspected, correctly, that it was the closest thing to heaven that the world had . . . Well, now I'm telling you that we underestimated it, and you have *no idea* what is enclosed within a Cistercian monastery . . . Believe me, and you will understand, that after one comes to know and experience monastic life, no other way will do. There I found something so very rare and strange in this world . . . it's called *love* of neighbor, and charity.

Well . . . if I knew how to put them into words, there are so many things I would tell you about, things that I know would make you shed tears of happiness . . . But I'll leave all that for when we see one another face to face, which I hope will be soon. The more beautiful thing would be to say that I'll tell you everything when we see each other in heaven, but surely up there we won't have time to waste on such trifles, don't you think? . . . But while we are here on earth, no matter how high up you might be, I know you must have some interest in the trifles of your more-than-a-nephew, Brother María Rafael . . . on the other hand, I'd hate to be a nuisance.

You asked me if I knew Mr. Pedro Sánchez del Río, I think I mentioned him to you one time . . . He is an *intimate* friend of mine, and there are many things I have told only to him . . . He is a man of God, if not a saint, for as we've already agreed, the word *saint* is applied too liberally; he is a man given over to God, a man who is *truly* virtuous . . . Yes, I can assure you I know him well . . . You're sure to like him. If you want to tell him something, you can do so in full confidence.

I was very grateful to Aunt María<sup>363</sup> for her letter, knowing how little she likes to write. I know that you both remember me before the Tabernacle, and at the feet of Mary above all. I, on the other hand . . . I'm such an idiot! What can I say?

I'm so sorry about Pili<sup>364</sup> . . . she's so good and kind to her cousin Rafael. Tell her for me that I'll be sending a surprise for her soon, and if she's sick, I am too, so she ought to ask God to make us both better soon. That's what I'm doing.

Aunt María tells me that you aren't taking care of yourself and that I should encourage you to let yourself be taken care of. Good Lord, Uncle Polín, you're too old for this. But I'll just share with you a reflection that I am doing myself. "God has sent me this illness, why? To humble me . . . So, humble yourself." I know it's hard to be at the mercy of broth and injections and schedules and doctors . . . Man provides the means and God provides everything else . . . There's nothing else we can do.

When I left the monastery, Father Abbot said to me, "You must return, therefore, I charge you to obey the doctor as if he were Father Master . . ." And so, obedience takes part in my recovery. Do the same thing . . . obey, and don't misbehave.

I have nothing else in particular to tell you. Everyone is doing well here, thank God, there's no news.

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<sup>363</sup> *Aunt María*: María Osorio, who was married to Leopoldo Barón.

<sup>364</sup> *Pili*: Rafael's cousin Pilar, daughter of María Osorio and Leopoldo Barón, who was sick at the time.

One of these days I'll write my grandmother and Aunt María Barón,<sup>365</sup> but not until they've left Madrid, because Mamá and Merceditas<sup>366</sup> are going there for some tests. They'll give her news of her grandson.

I'm so glad that Anita<sup>367</sup> thought of me. When you write to her, you can tell her that this Trappist, whenever he prayed for the missions, never forgot that *poor lady* who, in India, had the same thing on her mind as I did . . . serving God. In fact, I'll tell you when I prayed for her.

Since, in La Trapa, not a minute is wasted—not during intervals, and not even while moving from one place to the next—upon leaving the church, after the examination of conscience, on my way to the refectory, I'd devote that time to the missions . . . We'd leave church in a line and walk through the cloister, very slowly, with our hoods up, all the way to the refectory. Since we were walking in silence, each of us would pray whatever he liked . . . As I said, I devoted that time to the missions. I'd think of God's goodness in giving me the food my body needed . . . I'd thank Him for the peace of my

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<sup>365</sup> *My grandmother and Aunt María Barón*: Fernanda Torres Erro, Rafael's maternal grandmother, and María Josefa Barón Torres, his maternal aunt, who lived together.

<sup>366</sup> *Mamá and Merceditas*: Rafael's mother, Mercedes, and his sister, also named Mercedes (nicknamed Merceditas), visited Madrid and made a trip to the monastery of San Isidro on June 24, 1934 (OC 261).

<sup>367</sup> *Anita*: Ana Solana, who ran a publishing house called Editorial Escuela Española that focused on Christian education. She went to India as a missionary, but got sick and returned to Madrid to resume work as a publisher.

convent and, at the same time, I'd ask Him not to forget the missionaries who sometimes don't have anything to eat, much less a convent. It is the Trappist's obligation to pray in silence for those who are in the world winning souls for Christ; I saw myself as under that obligation . . . and every day, absolutely every day, during the six or seven minutes we'd take walking from the choir to the refectory, I'd pray for Anita.

This shows you that in La Trapa, you are in communication with God from the moment you wake up to when you fall asleep . . . Every monk has his particular devotions, and the silence helps so much . . . I remember a priest in Ávila who, one time, I think I already told you this, was arguing with me at Father Justo's<sup>368</sup> house. He was saying that monks' silence was absurd, and that this business of not talking was so stupid, and so on and so forth . . . I've thought of that priest so many times . . . If only he knew that the most beautiful thing there is in La Trapa is the silence . . . But what does the world know of that?

Alright, I'm finishing this letter, I think this is enough for today. Write me back if you feel like it. The other day Casio<sup>369</sup> wrote a very nice letter to Papá; greet them for me. As usual, all my love to you and Aunt María from your nephew and brother,

*Rafael*

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<sup>368</sup> *Fr. Justo*: Father Justo Sánchez Muñoz (see Letter 5).

<sup>369</sup> *Casio*: A friend of Leopoldo Barón and María Osorio's.

**38. Dedication of a holy card<sup>370</sup> of Saint Thérèse of the Child Jesus  
to Ramón Vallaure<sup>371</sup>**

Oviedo, July 7, 1934

If we have something to learn from all the saints . . . when it comes to Saint Thérèse of Lisieux, we ought to especially to imitate her joy amid suffering. How beautiful it is to have one's heart torn open for love of Jesus, to suffer bitterness, to carry the weight of a great cross and yet, all the while, to show a bright face and a friendly smile so as not to disturb the peace of one's neighbor with our troubles . . . Tell them only to our good Jesus, and suffer them joyfully. Carry the cross with a joyful heart, and if tears should come to our eyes, let us ask forgiveness of God for our weakness on the cross, and ask forgiveness of our brothers, too.

*Brother María Rafael Arnáiz*

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<sup>370</sup> *Holy card*: a small picture, usually of Jesus, Mary, a Biblical scene, or a saint, produced for devotional use. Some holy cards come with prayers printed on the back, while others are left blank so that a handwritten message can be added.

<sup>371</sup> Ramón, the younger brother of Rafael's close friend Juan Vallaure (see Letter 9), later entered the monastery at San Isidro. Rafael did not include the date; it was later added by Ramón.

### 39. to Fr. Marcelo León

Oviedo, July 22, 1934

My dear Father Master,

This letter, naturally, is addressed to you, but it is a reply to the kind letters I received from Fr. Francisco<sup>372</sup> and my co-novices.<sup>373</sup> If I haven't answered them earlier, as I should have, it's because I've been waiting for the doctor's permission, which I now have, to announce that I will be visiting on the first of August, name day of our dear Father Abbot.<sup>374</sup>

I am, thank God, almost completely well. I hardly have any "sugar" anymore, but I'm continuing the "insulin" treatments and diet . . . The doctor told me that I can absolutely go spend three days at my monastery, so I'll leave here on the 31<sup>st</sup> on the express train, and I'll be at La Trapa the 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, and 3<sup>rd</sup>. He'll give me a note that explains what I can eat, which is almost everything. I'll bring the injection so that Fr. Vicente<sup>375</sup> can give it to me. Afterwards it's just a matter of two or three more months, though to me they seem like centuries, during which I will return to the monastic diet on

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<sup>372</sup> Father Francisco Díez Martínez (1907–1954), the sub-master of novices.

<sup>373</sup> *My co-novices*: Brothers Isidro David Ortega, Bernardo Michelena, and Damián Yáñez Neira.

<sup>374</sup> August 1 is the feast of two saints connected with Fr. Felix Alonso García's name: Saint Felix of Girona and Saint Alphonsus Liguori.

<sup>375</sup> Fr. Vicente Pardo Feliú, the monastery infirmarian.

a trial basis, so that later I can pick up my life where I left off, alongside the Tabernacle at La Trapa and my good brothers.

According to the doctor I'll have to be under observation for a while, but I am sure that I can count on your charity to arrange that.

If only you could see, Father, how disoriented I am in the world! . . . I would return to La Trapa even as a gardener, eating the leftovers that are given to the poor . . . But such extremes are not necessary.

When I left the infirmary to come back here, I thought that God would either bring me to heaven, or make me healthy so I could keep being a Trappist . . . It seems that God has opted for the latter. He must know better than we do what is good for us, and even in adversity, we must continue to give Him thanks for everything, especially me. Our good God treats me in such a way that I can do nothing but sink down to the ground, prostrate myself at His feet, and exclaim: "Lord, who am I that you should care for me,<sup>376</sup> the least of the Trappists, the creature who has never returned unto God all His benefits; and yet whom, in Your infinite goodness, you take by the hand and guide through the world? And if it is You, O Lord, who put obstacles before me, it is also You who take them away, so that your children might not stumble."

But I know that it's not on account of my merits, for when I examine my conscience, I know I don't have any. It's the other way around . . . Everything we receive from God is on account of the merits of the Christ who died on a Cross, and we receive them through Mary's intercession.

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<sup>376</sup> Psalm 8:5.

And what more can God give than a vocation? Oh, my dear co-novices, you don't know what you have, nor will you ever be able to give God sufficient thanks for such a great blessing; I didn't know what I had either, until I had to return to the world. If I thought the world was crazy or disturbed before going to La Trapa, now I feel as though God has abandoned it, that He has left people all alone, for in their suicidal pride, they shout, "We don't need God . . ." And society is unhinged, focusing on *everything* except what is actually important, and I'm telling you, honestly, seeing people be so blind, it makes me sad and makes me want to shout at them . . . "Where are you going?! Fools or lunatics . . . You are crucifying Jesus, that man from Nazareth who commanded us to love one another<sup>377</sup> . . . Can't you see that you are going down a terrible path . . . that life is very short and we have to use it well, for God's Judgment draws near?" But it's useless; in the world no one talks of God and His Judgment . . . It's all envy, earthly ambitions, and uncontrolled passions. Seeing this sad spectacle, how could I not give thanks to God for my vocation? . . . How could I not yearn for my corner of La Trapa? . . .

No, Brother Isidro, it is not, as you said in your letter, unusual or surprising that I should try to advance, as you say, and scorn what the world offers me, yearning for the beans at La Trapa . . . I see it as perfectly natural and logical. The world pays me in currency that holds no value in the eyes of God . . . You can buy the world with money, but not heaven. Therefore, just as you dispose of a counterfeit *duro* that can't buy you anything, so also you ought to dispose of everything that serves no purpose except to get

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<sup>377</sup> John 13:34; 15:17; 1 John 3:11.



through life pleasantly . . . but that's all. Truth be told, life is a very little thing . . . it's nothing really. For us Christians, our life is not here on earth; let us leave behind, then, those who are content with less, and instead go store up good treasure for ourselves in heaven<sup>378</sup> with the only currency that has any value . . . And that currency is sacrifice, mortification, prayer—in a word, the life of a Trappist.

It's not, therefore, that I am advancing or retreating, it's simply . . . utterly logical, for, as Brother Bernardo tells me, peeling potatoes for love of God is better than all the luxuries the world could give me.

I'd love to be able to put some texts in Latin here for Father Francisco, to respond in kind to his letter, but it just so happens that I still don't know any. What I will tell him is this: Father Francisco, I prayed the novena to Saint Thérèse in union with you, and I hope that she will make me well.

You can't imagine how grateful I was for your letters, and how much consolation I received from them. I read them over many times, giving thanks to God for the true affection rooted in love for God and charity that they exuded. In truth, I don't deserve any of that; but it's also true that if we Trappist monks do not put into practice the Gospel precept, *love one another*,<sup>379</sup> who will? We seek perfection in the world, and that is the only perfection there is.

When will Brother Damián profess?<sup>380</sup>

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<sup>378</sup> See Matt 6:19–21.

<sup>379</sup> John 13:34, 15:17; 1 John 3:11.

<sup>380</sup> Brother Damián Yáñez Neira made his first profession of vows on July 25, 1934.

In brief . . . there are so many things I'd tell you and ask you, but I can't express it all in a letter. I am counting the days until I am able to come spend three nights at the monastery.

Keep praying to Our Lady the Blessed Virgin for me, just as I am, so that we might be able to resume my novitiate; and that instead of going around in a car, living the high life, I might be able to keep trying to light and snuff out candles without making any mistakes and operating the organ bellows when the power is out<sup>381</sup> . . . At the end of the day, that's my place.

I am always thinking of my life in the monastery, and I still don't know if I am dreaming. Who could have told me, as those trains passed by at such high speed while we were out among the vines, that I'd have to use them again? . . . But what do we human beings know of what might happen to us? And when you surrender yourself to God without reserve, you have to be open to anything.

Tell the oblates and Fr. Amadeo<sup>382</sup> that they'll see the "tall novice" in just a few days, God willing.

Father Master, give my regards to Rev. Father Abbot. Commending myself to your prayers, and looking forward to seeing you very soon, your brother in Jesus and Mary,

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<sup>381</sup> See Letter 34.

<sup>382</sup> *Fr. Amadeo*: Father Amadeo Pérez García (1908–2008) was responsible for the young oblates, children being raised and schooled in the monastery (see Manuscript 7).

*Brother María*

*Rafael*

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*O.C.R.*<sup>383</sup>

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<sup>383</sup> *O.C.R.*: Short for *Orden Cisterciense Reformada*, lit. “Reformed Cistercian Order,” a name that is no longer in common usage. The official abbreviation for the Trappists is *O.C.S.O.*, for the *Order of the Cistercians of the Strict Observance*.

## 40. to María Osorio

Oviedo, July 23, 1934

My dearest Aunt María,

Counting on your promise that you'd write me back, I'm writing to you, even though in reality I have nothing to tell you that you don't already know.

Tío Polín will have already told you how I'm doing, and I can assure you I'm getting better every day.

On the 31<sup>st</sup> I'm leaving for Venta de Baños on the express train. I'll be there for just *three* days, the 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, and 3<sup>rd</sup> of August . . . I don't have the doctor's permission to be away any longer. If I did, I'd have come to pay your family a visit<sup>384</sup> . . . but I don't want to take advantage.

I need these days at La Trapa with my dear brothers as I need to eat . . . And it seems that God, in His goodness, has granted them to me in order to give me a light rest. It's not that I deserve it, but Jesus knows very well how far His creatures can go, and at opportune moments He always holds out His hand. If, for a moment, it seems as though He has left us all alone . . . it's not so; for when we most feel that we are alone, that is when God is nearest to us, keeping close watch. If He puts obstacles in our path, He removes them Himself . . . There's nothing to do but let Him work.

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<sup>384</sup> Despite what Rafael says here, he did in fact go to Ávila to see his aunt and uncle, after spending eight days at La Trapa (OC 272).

The first day of August is the name day of our good Father Abbot,<sup>385</sup> and he'll be pleased to see me that day, if I do say so myself.

The other day the doctor told me that I'll be able to resume my novitiate in just a few months . . . I won't dare to say that I ardently desire it, since it is because of an excess of *personal desires* that I find myself at home . . . I imagine you know what I mean . . . but the lesson has been beneficial to me.

I now understand very well the rather narrow way that Saint John of the Cross points out to us, the one that is between two others. On those two, he says, are prayer, contemplation, spiritual consolations, earthly gifts, spiritual gifts, etc . . . But between those two ways is the one I am talking about, and on that one is simply nothing . . . nothing . . . nothing . . .<sup>386</sup>

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<sup>385</sup> See Letter 39.

<sup>386</sup> Here Rafael is describing the "mount of perfection" as envisioned in Saint John of the Cross's treatise *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*. The work begins with a visual representation showing three ways up the mount: two labeled "the way of the imperfect spirit," and one in the middle, labeled "the way of Mount Carmel, the perfect spirit." The two imperfect ways begin by seeking the "goods of heaven" and the "goods of earth" respectively, while the perfect way begins by seeking "nothing," and it is the only one that reaches the perfection to be found at the mount's peak. See John of the Cross, *The Collected Works of Saint John of the Cross*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1991), 110–11.

How difficult it is, Aunt María, to reach that. And for those of us who are just starting out, how easy it is to get it wrong, and how many times we want to find God where He is not to be found! And when we believe we have found Him, we find only ourselves . . . but we need not lose heart. God permits all things for the good of one's soul; without knowing failure, one cannot savor success. And one cannot approach God without having first relinquished *everything* and being left with *nothing*, as Saint John of the Cross says.<sup>387</sup>

But anyway, I'm not telling you anything new, and may God forgive me for wanting to address such exalted things; I can't even crawl yet, and here I am already wanting to fly . . . That has been my sin, and it continues to be . . . But if only you knew, Jesus is so good to me that He forgives me everything and understands me. After all, all children falsely believe that, before they have even reached their father's knees, they are already strong enough to handle his saber and put on his spurs. Meanwhile the father looks on lovingly, and the bravado of his children makes him laugh, knowing that if he were not watching them from behind, who knows what would happen to his darlings . . . The same thing must happen to God with me. When He saw me take up arms with such exuberance, it must have made Him laugh, and He said to me, "To become a general, first you must be a soldier. And before you can become a soldier, I have to take your

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<sup>387</sup> As Saint John of the Cross wrote to Sr. Magdalena del Espíritu Santo, the nun to whom he had addressed the "mount of perfection" described in the previous note, "To possess God in all, you should possess nothing in all" (John of the Cross, *Collected Works*, 752).

measurements and see if you'll do . . . ” And that's what He is doing with me, and I can promise you, Aunt María, that I'm standing on my tippy-toes and raising my head up high, but I just barely measure up.

Pardon my simile. I don't know how to express myself any other way, and if I'm telling you all this, it's because I have so much inside me and no one to share it with. And since you, in your great charity, listen to me, I'm pouring my heart out.

Before, finding myself so alone, I was greatly saddened. Now, I'm growing accustomed to it. In La Trapa, sufferings and joys alike are for God alone, and He is the one whom we ought to seek out as our only confidant.

But for some reason, you two are the exception, and if God offers me this consolation, I'm not going to reject it . . . I'm not seeking it out. He is offering it to me through you, and affection, when it goes far beyond earthly things, is pleasing in the eyes of God. The only pleasure that we, His true children, can experience is to speak of Him; and our great joy is to find souls whom God finds pleasing. For here on earth it is so difficult to find creatures of His who, forgetting everything—dealings, affairs, laughter, tears—lift their hearts and think of nothing but God, who sing to Him, gaze at Him, worship Him; whose earthly life is a continual *hosanna!*

What does it matter if we are above or below, close to God or far from Him; let us turn our gaze toward Him and join together to praise Him, some in monastic life, others at the missions, others in the world, some this way and others that way . . . what does it matter? . . . He fills it all, and if we look around at one another, we are wasting time . . . Sometimes a creature is very beautiful, but the sight of it distracts us from the Creator.

We ought to go on with our gaze fixed on Him, whether we are among saints or among sinners . . . We are nothing; we are worth nothing and we are good for nothing when we are distracted and don't take notice of the Lord. So let's not waste time. If we please the Lord with a little sacrifice, with a prayer or an act of love, then we can say that at least we've been good for something, which is giving Him greater glory . . . That ought to be our only occupation and our only desire.

I won't ask about your concerns because I already know they are going poorly . . . Jesus loves you so much!! Most people don't see it this way, but it doesn't escape me: you have the greatest fortune in the family. It seems paradoxical, doesn't it? . . . But you also know it's true. If there's one thing you have that's worth anything, it's not your titles, or your money, or anything else the world aspires to . . . The best thing of all, the thing of which, to a certain extent, you can be proud, is your poverty . . . God loves you so much, Aunt María. Jesus does not do such things for anyone but His chosen ones; with that you can be pleased.

Well, I have nothing else to tell you; my life is very simple. In the morning I go to receive Communion; afterwards I have breakfast and I go to a quiet beach near Cabo de Peñas; I sunbathe, make sketches, and praise God as I look at the sea. After eating, I sleep for a bit, take a walk, make my visit to the Most Blessed Sacrament, have dinner, say the Rosary and go to sleep . . . That's it.



Today I went to El Musel, which is the port of Gijón.<sup>388</sup> I go there sometimes to watch the fishing. I saw a spectacle that's always impressive, but it left me a little sad, which was a German passenger ship departing for the high seas . . . It was a lovely evening and the sea was calm; it would have been around eight o'clock; the lighthouses of the nearby ports began to illuminate . . .

I was at the end of the quay, listening to that noise so characteristic of ports with their cranes and ship sirens and churning oars. Suddenly, pilot boats surrounded the ship, requesting passage for the colossus; one could hear the creak of the chains weighing anchor, and above all that noise, the deep, powerful siren of the ship as it advanced slowly toward the port's exit . . .

As it crossed out and around the breakwater, the boat's lights came on and the orchestra on the poop deck played a foxtrot. The travelers looked scornfully upon the humble fishermen who in their old, dirty barges were getting their nets in order or returning from the open sea after a thirteen- or fourteen-hour work day. The fishermen, in their turn, watched the gigantic ship approach, all strength and lights and music . . . that floating hotel where brothers and sisters in God are separated into first-, second-, and third-class passengers . . .

I'm telling you, Aunt María, it's made me think, for the world is nothing but that . . . a big ship that heads out to sea confident in its own power and strength, when at the slightest breeze all that power would be sunk for good.

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<sup>388</sup> *Gijón*: The largest city in Asturias, just north of where Rafael's family lived in Oviedo.

On the ship, as in the world, people numb themselves by making the jazz band play, and for them life seems to drift by pleasantly . . . but behind all that, such bitterness, such falsehood in everything, such ambition repressed and such passion released . . .

I don't know if my brother Trappists were praying the *Salve* to the Virgin at that same time . . . but the truth is, that music coming from the ship . . . saddened me greatly, and later, when I went into the church and saw the Tabernacle so alone, with just four old ladies and me . . . believe me, my prayer was to put all humanity in God's hands and to intercede for them all . . . the ones on the boat, those fellow creatures of mine, who were dancing on the deck so calmly and confidently, without thinking about how God, if He wanted, needed nothing more than a whim to make all that power disappear under the waves . . . What sorrow, my God, what sorrow . . . and the Tabernacle all alone.

So many times, there at La Trapa, getting up at two in the morning and going to choir, and laying myself at the feet of Jesus, I offered up my exhaustion and the cold for the sake of humanity . . . and I thought: "Lord, what I'm offering You is such a little thing, but these days there are so many souls, creatures of Yours who, since they do not know You, may perhaps be offending You . . . Forgive them, Lord . . . if I could stop some people from drifting away from You . . . I'd be so pleased . . ." And I believe that God heard me, for the cold and the exhaustion became almost pleasant to me.

I should like to see the whole world prostrate itself before the Tabernacle, before the Cross, and instead of that, what do I see? Why am I explaining any of this to you? . . . You already know all this quite well . . . We Christians are largely responsible if we don't do anything for the conversion of the world; we can all contribute something.

Don't let anything I'm saying shock you. My departure from La Trapa has made me see humanity in a whole new light . . . that is, now I see people as my brothers and sisters who do not know their Father . . . I have more of a Trappist mindset, and the Trappist judges charitably . . . that's all.

Well, a good deal of nonsense and foolishness occur to me, none of it relevant. I'm writing down everything that occurs to me, and there are things that shouldn't occur to me, but you, who know me, will be able to handle it . . . Don't pay me any mind, because if my actions corresponded to my words, "that would be a different story," as they say, but unfortunately that's not the case.

Tell Uncle Polín that I'll do his cover<sup>389</sup> when I get back from La Trapa. By the way, I'll see my brother Fernandito while I'm there. When he heard that I'd be there for three days, he wanted to come see me . . . Is it true what they say, that one fool makes many?

Tell Uncle Polín also that his friend Pedro<sup>390</sup> decided to start praying the Little Office of the Blessed Virgin.<sup>391</sup> I'm very happy for him . . . but I'm even happier for Our Lady, who now has one more devotee. If only you knew what devotion she receives at La Trapa, it's rather marvelous. There's not a single Trappist who isn't a loving son of our

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<sup>389</sup> Rafael painted the covers for various books that his uncle translated from French (see Letter 6). It is unclear to which of them he is referring here.

<sup>390</sup> *Pedro*: Their mutual friend, Pedro Sánchez del Río; see Letter 37.

<sup>391</sup> *Little Office of the Blessed Virgin*: A liturgical devotion; see Dedication 24.

Mother . . . Just one detail: when they brought in the statue that Granda<sup>392</sup> made, Reverend Father strictly prohibited kissing it because it was going to end up without any paint on it at all.

The first words the porter said to me when I got to the guesthouse were “Now, not to worry. Anything that occurs to you, tell it to the Virgin Mary, for in my twentysomething years as a Trappist, she has never refused me anything.”<sup>393</sup> And the man said it with such devotion, and spoke about Our Lady with such great faith, that from the very first day, she indeed never refused me anything.

I remember those first few days, I had to control myself somewhat in the refectory, because the iron plate and oxhorn spoon weren’t to my liking . . . And so, before going in, I’d pray a *Salve* to my Mother asking Her to help me . . . and very calmly. When I’d go out to work in the fields, one hand on my hoe and the other on my rosary, frost could fall and it wouldn’t matter anymore . . . If only you could see what care we took in the novitiate with the May flowers . . . it was interrupted by my illness.<sup>394</sup>

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<sup>392</sup> *Granda*: A liturgical art firm based in Madrid, founded in 1891 by Fr. Félix Granda y Buylla. The monastery had commissioned a statue of the Assumption for their main altar from the company in 1926.

<sup>393</sup> When Rafael entered the monastery in January 1934, the monastery porter was Brother Justo García Hidalgo (1893–1980).

<sup>394</sup> According to Br. Damián, the novices gathered wildflowers as they worked, and Rafael would arrange them before a statue of Our Lady, to whom the month of May is

How gentle and sweet it is to devote oneself to Mary. It is the one consolation in La Trapa, to know that Mary is protecting us. And lastly, the *Salve* at dusk, before heading to the dormitory; they are the Trappist's last words at the end of the day . . . and with that he sleeps soundly, knowing that if he were to die that night, the Virgin would come for him and present him to Her Son . . . If you knew how well you sleep knowing that, even if your bed is hard . . . With bodies that are tired and sometimes in pain, but with hearts trusting in Our Lady and calm faces, there is not a single Trappist who cannot get to sleep. Later, when Vigils begin in the choir, the Trappist's first words are also *Ave Maria*.

If you knew how ashamed I felt at having gone so long without a true devotion to Our Lady. It's not enough to pray the Little Office, or the Rosary, or half a million novenas . . . You have to love Her very much . . . so much. You have to tell Her everything, trust Her with everything; she is a true Mother . . . And it seems to me—and this is just what I think, so don't give it a second thought—that the more love one has for the Virgin, without even realizing it, the more love we have for God. That is, our love for God grows in proportion to the love we cultivate for the Blessed Virgin<sup>395</sup> . . . and that's

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traditionally devoted. They stopped when Rafael started experiencing symptoms in mid-May (OC 280).

<sup>395</sup> While this formulation is Rafael's, the practice of growing in love for God through Marian devotion is a broad tradition in the church. The most prominent advocate of drawing close "to Jesus through Mary" is Saint Louis de Montfort (1673–1716), whose *True Devotion to Mary* is a popular guide to Marian consecration. See Louis-Marie

only natural. How are we going to love a Mother and not Her Son? Impossible. And what won't we receive from God if we ask it of Him through Mary's intercession? . . . Nothing . . . Jesus' first miracle was at the Virgin's request, and I imagine Mary's face as She looked at Jesus and told him, "They have no wine."<sup>396</sup> It's one of the miracles that resonates most with me because Mary takes part.

Well, I'm going on too long, and I'm preaching to the choir, but if I don't talk to you about God and the Virgin, what do you want me to talk to you about? I don't know anything else, and I'm not interested in anything else, and let's not take up something less important just for the sake of leaving the weighty stuff behind, don't you agree?

I'm going to finish this letter. I don't think you'll complain about the length, but even though I want to tell you so many things, since they're nothing of any interest, I don't want to distract you any longer . . . When I'm back in the novitiate, I'll write you and tell you things about La Trapa, which I suppose will interest you. For now, let it be enough to know that your nephew, Brother Rafael, never forgets you in his prayers, and that I don't ask God to fix anything for you, because He'll know how best to handle it. And since the interests of humankind are nearly always in opposition to the interests of God, when everything seems like chaos with no possible resolution in sight, that's when everything is at its best . . . And what more can you ask than to live by alms? We have to atone for the blood poured out by Christ somehow, and if it's not in this world, it'll be in

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Grignon de Montfort, *True Devotion to Mary* (Charlotte, NC: Saint Benedict Press), 2010.

<sup>396</sup> John 2:1–3.

the next. And when the Lord offers a trial on earth, we must give Him infinite thanks; and the true, worthy trials are the ones He sends us, not the ones we seek out . . .

To that end, I'm going to tell you something trivial that astonished me one day at La Trapa.

In the early days of my novitiate, as is rather natural, I felt a real thirst for humiliation and mortification . . . I wanted to perform penances, so I asked them of Father Master . . . and I went all the way up to Father Abbot. Naturally, they laughed at my candor . . . and afterwards I understood what I told you earlier. I thought I was seeking God, but what I was doing was seeking myself . . . we all fall into that . . .

But you'll see. In the refectory, when the whole community is eating in silence, listening to the reading of the Martyrology,<sup>397</sup> whenever a monk makes a noise—he drops a piece of cutlery or spills his water or something similar—that is, whenever he disturbs the silence or calls attention to himself, he has to get up and go to the middle of the refectory. Then he must fully prostrate himself on the ground in front of all his brothers and ask Father Abbot's forgiveness, and remain there until he is sent back to his place.

This is always very embarrassing, and I've seen little old men with white hair go scarlet when a similar mishap befalls them . . .

Anyway, I too desired to prostrate myself in front of the whole community in the refectory, but it just so happened that I didn't make any noise, nor did I drop anything. So I spent a few days with the strong temptation to throw something, as if out of

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<sup>397</sup> *Martyrology*: The Roman Martyrology lists the saints and beati who are commemorated each day.

carelessness, and thereby make a noise and go to the middle of the refectory . . . As you can see, this was all very poorly done. It was clear that the spirit of evil desired to be at work in me. The end was a mortification but the means was a lie; assessing the situation rightly, even the mortification itself was a lie, for it gratified a desire of mine and there was even vanity in it . . .

This went on for a few days . . . how totally absurd. Anyway, I wasn't at peace . . . I told Father Master what was going on and he told me to be careful not to do anything that would disturb the silence in the refectory . . . that to do so would be very bad . . . And so then I turned to the Virgin and told Her about it one day before going in to eat. When we were in choir, I explained my predicament to Her, and since the mortifications I sought out were imperfect because they were according to my desires, I asked Her to send me some, and I'd leave it be . . . I thought it best that way.

Well believe me, after asking the Virgin for that . . . We got to the refectory, and as the reader paused, when there was even greater silence . . . I got tangled up somehow in my cape, dropped my water, made a ruckus, nearly spilled all over the brother next to me . . . and finished by dropping the little crystal glass we use to drink right on the stony floor . . . Between the rules and the noise and my failings, the only thing I managed to pick up, in my embarrassment, was a handle that had landed on the pile of shattered glass on the floor.

Didn't you want to go prostrate yourself? So go do it, now that you weren't expecting it, time to see what you'll do . . . I wished the ground would swallow me whole. My vision started dancing around, I flushed deep red, I did what I was supposed to . . . and I did it poorly and hastily. Ever since that day, I take exquisite pains at the



table. When I am eating, I gather up my cape very carefully, and I never asked the Virgin for mortifications ever again. That's no good. Don't ask for anything, because without asking for it and when you least expect it, you'll be dished up a whole plateful, and it'll put you in a daze for a good while. I speak from experience and it's plain to see.

There's something better than cilices and disciplines,<sup>398</sup> and that is conforming *entirely* to the will of God and asking nothing of Him, and desiring nothing. Often, in thinking about those words *ask and it will be given you*,<sup>399</sup> and how needy we are, even as I would ask things of God . . . I'd say to myself, "Lord, I ask *nothing* of you . . . but enclosed in that dry 'nothing' is everything that You can give me, which I cannot quite understand, for you give me so much that my imagination cannot encompass it . . . May my will be Your will; my desires, Your desires; my interests, those of Jesus; my loves, those of Jesus. I want nothing that You do not want. If I do not please You, destroy me and annihilate me. As you can see, Lord, I ask nothing of You, and yet . . . I ask you for everything."

Nevertheless, Aunt María, after all that, I go and draw close to the Virgin and, like a spoiled child, I ask my Mother for candy behind my Father's back.

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<sup>398</sup> *Cilices and disciplines*: Instruments of physical penance. A cilice is a spiked metal garter worn on the arm or leg; Rafael had used it occasionally as a layman, but was not permitted to do so in the monastery. A discipline is a small whip made of rope; in Rafael's community, its use on Fridays, especially in Lent, was largely symbolic and would not have caused physical harm.

<sup>399</sup> See Matt 7:7–8; Mark 11:24; Luke 11:9–10.

But anyway, you don't need me to explain all that. You can understand this letter and all its gibberish perfectly, right? And if something in it seems wrong to you, tell me; I've made so many mistakes, what's one more . . . And what does it matter if our judgments and opinions are wrong . . . ? At the end of the day, we are human. But the one thing about which we must be totally sure is our love for God . . . One who has true love for God has everything . . . this love even feeds you, unless you think that irreverent of me to say.

Well, write me back if you have time. Do you still visit the dying? How is Pili<sup>400</sup> doing? Are you finally going to Pedrosillo<sup>401</sup> with your father and the dog? . . . Let's see if you overcome your father . . . I'll help you from here, but don't make him pray too much . . . or else he might end up in La Trapa. Greet him for me. Hugs to everyone, and whatever else you want from your nephew and brother in Jesus and Mary,

*Rafael*

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<sup>400</sup> *Pili*: Pilar, María's daughter, who was sick at the time.

<sup>401</sup> *Pedrosillo*: The family estate outside Ávila.

**41. to Fernanda Torres**

Ávila, August 9, 1934

My dearest grandmother,

Just a quick note to tell you that I went to La Trapa for eight days, and that my health continues to improve prodigiously, thanks to the Virgin, who wants me back in my beloved monastery for good . . . There, I was treated like the community's spoiled child. They all desire my return, especially my superiors. In that, I clearly see the will of God, which even in the midst of my illness remains providential and necessary for me. God ordains all things for His greater glory.

Today I'm going to Oviedo to continue treatment. From there, I'll write you at greater length, though you know that regardless I think of you and Aunt María often, for you are always in my prayers. That is all your Trappist grandson can do, as he remains Brother María Rafael in the eyes of God and men . . . With all the love you know your grandson has for you,

*Rafael*

**42. to Fr. Marcelo León**

Oviedo, August 11, 1934

My dear Father Master,

Just a quick note to let you know I've arrived safely at home. I spent a day in Ávila, where I surprised my aunt and uncle, and now I'm back at my parents' house to continue my recovery plan.

I was with the doctor today and he found me perfectly well. Starting today, I will only take one injection per day rather than the two I was taking before . . . That's all the news when it comes to my health.

When it comes to my spirit . . . what can I say, Father? Just that I am obeying God's will, and not merely with resignation, but with joy, for my desires are His desires. If He has temporarily separated me from my beloved brothers, He must know why He is doing it . . . Of course, my spirit is in the choir singing to God and the Virgin, while my body is here among men and women, dealing with them all, busying myself with the things that keep them busy. The only difference is that I do it all mechanically and indifferently, for I belong to God, my purpose is God, and He is the only one who can satisfy me completely . . . everything else is completely unnecessary to me, I don't need it at all . . . But since in the world, sadly, people occupy themselves with just about everything but Him, my antagonism toward it is very evident and obvious . . . God is

giving me this cross, and I bless it, for if, as Job says, *we receive the good at the hand of God*, shall we not also *receive the bad*?<sup>402</sup>

Everything comes to us from Him: health and illness, temporal goods, misfortunes and setbacks in this life . . . He has arranged everything, absolutely everything, with perfection. If creatures ever rebel against what God commands us, we commit a sin, for everything is necessary, everything is well made; laughter and tears are both necessary. Everything can profit us and our greater perfection, so long as we look with the spirit of faith and see God at work in everything, and remain as children in the Father's hands. Where shall we go all on our own?

As I find myself once more in the world, sick, separated from the monastery, in this situation . . . I can see that I needed it, that the lesson I'm learning is very useful. My heart is still so tethered to creatures, and God wants me to free it so that I can give it to Him alone.

Father, on the day I left the monastery, I was standing in the back during the Office of None, now dressed as a layman, and while the monks chanted, looking at them and finding myself uprooted from the choir, I shed such bitter tears . . . I bade everyone farewell in my heart, since I could no longer give them a hug . . . After drying my eyes, I realized that those tears would have been more pleasing to God if, rather than looking at my brothers in religion whom I love so much, I had instead looked more at the Tabernacle . . . Don't you agree? . . . Ultimately, it is sadder to leave the house of God than to separate oneself from humanity . . . but we do not govern our own hearts, and

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<sup>402</sup> Job 2:10.

mine has always made me suffer . . . since God wants me to be better and more perfect, it is clear that this trial He has sent me, however difficult, is necessary . . .

Pray for me then, Father, asking Our Lady to help me profit from this. For it is true that it is beautiful to love one's neighbor, but God comes first, then creatures. The two go together . . . but God first, God always, and God alone. Of course, I'm not trying to root out those feelings entirely, but rather God merely wants me to perfect them. That is why He carries me around like a toy, leaving pieces of my heart all over the place. How great God is, Father Marcelo, and how well He does everything!! He loves me so much, and I love Him so poorly in return! His providence is infinite, and we ought to surrender ourselves to it without reserve . . . He wants me at home now for a few months; all right, then, I'll be here as long as He wants.

Father Master, the day you see me again in the novitiate, you will have yourself a novice who is a bit better than the one you had before, one with a greater desire to love God and the Virgin, one who is trying to return the blessings he receives from Jesus. If he were ever to shed tears in his room, or on his Father Master's knees, they would not be tears of affection or love for humanity, but rather tears of sorrow for the sins of his past life as well as those of the world. For now that I am in it, and I can see it a bit more clearly, it is terribly sad to see people who forget about Christ and adore nothing more than a golden calf,<sup>403</sup> their passions unleashed, without a care for the Blood that Jesus shed on the Cross.

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<sup>403</sup> Exod 32:4.

Forgive me, Father, that I am telling you so many things, and perhaps they are unbecoming. But in your charity, you will be able to handle them. I am a man who is suffering . . . and nothing more, so if I utter some nonsense, perhaps that is why.

Tell Fr. Vicente<sup>404</sup> that one of these days I'll send him the books I promised; I'll never be able to repay him all the kindness he has shown me. I'll write Fr. Francisco<sup>405</sup> and the novices soon, if you give me permission to do so, for though I am in the world, I consider myself your son through obedience, and I should not like to impose upon you. But if only you knew, Father—the letters I receive from La Trapa do me such good! For me they are the real injections . . . The flesh needs insulin injections, but the spirit needs these even more.

I have nothing to tell you, even though I want to use this letter to pour out everything that is in my heart, for the things there are many and much.

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<sup>404</sup> *Fr. Vicente*: the infirmarian at San Isidro (see Letter 35).

<sup>405</sup> *Fr. Francisco*: the sub-master of novices, who assisted Fr. Marcelo León with their formation (see Letter 33).

Give my best to Father Teófilo<sup>406</sup> and Father Buenaventura<sup>407</sup> and Brother Tescelino<sup>408</sup> . . . Well, to everyone. Let them pray to the Blessed Virgin that I might come back soon.

I'm going to start working on a painting of Saint Bernard,<sup>409</sup> we'll see how it turns out.

Give my kind regards to Reverend Father Abbot. I ask your blessing as your novice, which I remain until you say otherwise,

*Brother María Rafael*

*OCSO*<sup>410</sup>

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<sup>406</sup> *Father Teófilo*: Rafael's confessor, Fr. Teófilo Sandoval Fernández (see Letter 35).

<sup>407</sup> *Father Buenaventura*: Fr. Buenaventura Ramos Caballero (1903–1971), who served as the monastery porter from 1931 until 1940, when he was elected abbot (OC 73).

<sup>408</sup> Br. Tescelino Arribas Jimeno (1912–1992) assisted Fr. Vicente Pardo as second infirmarian. He left the monastery during the Spanish Civil War, reverting to his baptismal name, Toribio Luis (OC 292).

<sup>409</sup> *Saint Bernard*: Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, a Doctor of the Church who was an influential leader in the early years of the Cistercian reform.

<sup>410</sup> *OCSO*: Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance



### 43. to Leopoldo Barón

Oviedo, August 12, 1934

Dearest Uncle Polín,

Just as I promised, I'm sending you the letters that my mother sent me at La Trapa for you to read . . . though it's not particularly important that you read them. It's more important that you praise God in doing so, for when you encounter a soul as generous and great as my mother's, you cannot help but extol the Creator from the depths of your own.

Since she does not know I am sending them to you, please don't send them back to me. They are rather bulky and she may suspect . . . just give them to me when you see me next.

You will see a mother in these letters, and a heroic Christian one at that, one who is so generous with God that when her Trappist son would read them in some corner of the novitiate over in La Trapa, they would make him cry. At the same time, they would make him bless God for having given him such a mother, a mother who not only sacrificed her son to God, but who also helped him to carry his cross and offer his sacrifice, giving him the strength to do so.

How greatly prized in the eyes of God are such quiet souls who drink every last drop<sup>411</sup> resignedly, silently, and even joyfully. What myriad generous acts they can offer to God—even playing the piano . . . don't you think?

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<sup>411</sup> See Matt 26:39: *Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want, but what you want.*

As I observed my parents' greatness of soul and the glory they were giving to God in those days, I forgot my own suffering and hardships. What could my own actions merit compared to my parents' sublime generosity? . . . I am not the one who showed merit or gave glory to God . . . no, I am nothing at all. I am merely an implement in the hands of God, who is using me to carry out the work He is doing; and as Saint Thérèse says, what merit can a simple brush have in the ensemble required to create a painting?<sup>412</sup> . . . God, the Painter; creation, His painting; and when He needs to add certain details to make it perfect, the great Painter will make use of any little old paintbrush He wants.

Don't think me excessively modest, because I'm not, but when you—perhaps out of great affection for me—think me a bit heroic . . . there's no such heroism . . . Let's be clear about that, as all things ought to be among true children of God. Take a look around me and you'll see there are such great and beautiful souls here, which need only a brushstroke here and there to make them perfect . . . and that is God's work. He asks me to help, and I do (but understand that correctly: God doesn't need anyone) . . . But now that I've explained myself, in my own way, I think you'll understand what I'm saying . . .

Take a careful look at every detail . . . think on it a little, and you'll see how admirable God is, how everything is good and necessary: a Trappist's exhaustion and

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<sup>412</sup> “If an artist's canvas could but think and speak, surely it would never complain of being touched and re-touched by the brush, nor would it feel envious thereof, knowing that all its beauty is due to the artist alone. [. . .] I am the little brush that Jesus has chosen to paint His likeness” (Saint Thérèse of Lisieux Martin, *The Story of a Soul*, trans. Thomas Taylor [Project Gutenberg, 2005], chap. 10).

cold, a mother's tears . . . And let's not stop and ask ourselves who is giving God more glory, that's for small-minded people. Let it be enough for us to know that all of us put together are the work necessary for His glory. As you very well know, a painting needs light tones and darker ones, bright colors and more muted ones; it's a matter of not clashing with the whole . . . But the world does not generally see this, and in the present case, it only managed to see a man who, leaving the world, shut himself away in order to spend his life wearing sackcloth and gripping a hoe. Some thoughtless souls nearly raised him to the altars<sup>413</sup> . . . But that man in La Trapa, with the help of divine light, stopped to think and meditate, and he saw clearly that he was not doing anything special. Rather, he saw that what was truly beautiful in the eyes of God were those tears shed by a mother and father who, with their hearts torn to pieces, offered up their son for God's service . . . That is what God wanted, that is what He came looking for, and that is what is admirable: that through one soul's *voluntary* sacrifice, others might be sanctified through another sacrifice that is even more beautiful for their not having sought it out, a sacrifice that was given and offered to them by God . . . Isn't God a great artist, Uncle Polín?

I don't know if I am explaining myself well, but I think you will understand me perfectly. One day, not too long from now, we human beings will see the truth of everything I have just told you: that neither you nor I nor anyone else has merits to present before God, that we are nothing more than instruments with louder or softer roles in the symphony of creation, that on our own we are nothing and deserve nothing, that the

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<sup>413</sup> *Raised him to the altars*: that is, canonized him.

only merits flow from Jesus on the Cross, and in comparison everything else is but grains of sand scattered in the ocean.

It's just as I told you in the other letter: we contemplate ourselves too much, and each other, and we hardly look at God . . . He is all and He fills all. When we see a creature and find it pleasing, we ought not to exclaim, "Oh, what a beautiful soul, how it shines!" Instead, we ought to contemplate God within it, and nothing more. We know that souls—which are not to be called holy, but merely in a state of grace—are reflections of God's grace . . . And so, rather than stopping to look at the sun's reflection on the water, let's look up directly at the sun, don't you think?

Well, I'm writing you everything I think of, so perhaps I might utter some irrelevant nonsense, but in your charity you will be able to forgive me. For even silly things said for love of God are necessary, and I think that if we had true love for Him, we wouldn't even know how to speak reasonably, and we'd even go crazy. After all, isn't that exactly what the saints were, souls madly in love?

My father couldn't go to Santander because Aunt Petra<sup>414</sup> is very sick; she may not last longer than a few days. She is going peacefully, but it's been six days since she was able to eat anything, and yesterday she couldn't even drink a spoonful of water. How difficult it is to leave behind one's body . . . it's terrible.

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<sup>414</sup> Petra Sánchez de la Campa y Tasquer, Rafael's great-aunt, who died in August 1934 (OC 296).

How will she present herself before God so soon? Ask the Lord to show her mercy. She has already received all the sacraments, and there's nothing left to do but wait. When will it be our turn?

In a short six months, I've seen four people depart. I'm telling you, it's nothing to take lightly. I've been at death's door myself, and now I almost consider it natural. I pity all these people who think they are going to live here on earth forever. Such ambition, so many concerns, and not a thought for how all this is brief and passing away . . . Well, nothing to be done about that . . . You told me once that the world is not a great big Trapa, but rather it's the other way around.

Antonio<sup>415</sup> asks me if you received the pipe stems.

Now I only take one daily injection instead of two . . . Everything is on the right track.

I'm going to start working on a painting of Saint Bernard<sup>416</sup> for the novitiate; we'll see how it turns out. I'll remember Brother Bernardo<sup>417</sup> in my prayers while I'm painting it, and if it turns out well, I'll send you a photo.

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<sup>415</sup> *Antonio*: Probably a servant in the Arnáiz-Barón household (see Letter 10).

<sup>416</sup> *Saint Bernard*: Saint Bernard of Clairvaux (see Letter 42).

<sup>417</sup> *Brother Bernardo*: This is one of Rafael's nicknames for his uncle Leopoldo (OC 523). He once addressed a letter to him using this heading (see Letter 87).

Greet the Poor Clares<sup>418</sup> for me, and ask them to pray to Our Lady for me, that God's will might be done in my life, however difficult it might be for me to find myself away from the novitiate . . . but what does it matter?

The other day Fernandito<sup>419</sup> wrote me with all the details of the three days he spent at La Trapa. He said being there is so good that it hurt to leave, for in that quiet and solitude, you are with God, and being with God, you are no longer alone (his words), and that when he saw the monks' devotion as they sang the *Salve*, he wept . . . Blessed be God for everything, Uncle Polín.

Give Aunt María a big hug for me. I bid you farewell the same way the novices do before going up to receive the Lord: we embrace one another and say *pax tecum*, peace be with you my brother.

*Rafael*

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<sup>418</sup> *Poor Clares*: The Poor Clares, named for their founder, Saint Clare of Assisi, are the cloistered women's branch of the Franciscan Order. Leopoldo and María often visited the Poor Clare monastery in Ávila, where the abbess, Sor Pilar García (1882–1957), was a friend of Rafael's.

<sup>419</sup> *Fernandito*: Rafael's younger brother, Luis Fernando.

**44. to W. Marino del Hierro<sup>420</sup>**

Oviedo, August 15, 1934

Solemnity of the Ascension<sup>421</sup> of the Virgin

My brother in Christ,

This letter may perhaps strike you as inappropriate and presumptuous. You and I do not know each other, and thus I beg you to forgive my impertinence. However, all I know of you is that you recently came to know Jesus, and you are now suffering . . . That is enough for me. In any case, I will fill you in on who I am and why I am writing you.

In the world, my name is Rafael Arnáiz Barón. But I have a very beautiful nickname that I wouldn't trade for anything. To my first name, Rafael, the Abbot of San Isidro in Venta de Baños recently added the "Brother María" that is typical of the Trappists. Therefore, I am Brother M. Rafael, Trappist novice. Perhaps that's enough for you to know who I am, but I'll explain anyway.

On January 15, 1934, I entered the community and spent four months on what felt like the threshold of heaven. Then God, who does all things well, even the crosses He sends us at opportune times, desired that I come down with an illness that would oblige me to leave the monastery temporarily, and so I did . . .

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<sup>420</sup> As Rafael recounts in this letter, he was not personally acquainted with W. Marino del Hierro before writing him. They were put in touch by their mutual friend, Br. Tescelino Arribas, whom Rafael knew from the infirmary at San Isidro (see Letter 42).

<sup>421</sup> Rafael's error; it is the feast of the Assumption.

I was very close to death . . . and for the past three months I have been home convalescing from a deadly fit of “diabetes.” The Blessed Virgin provided for me, and I was fortunate enough to return to La Trapa recently . . . I was there for eight days, and, naturally, I stayed in the infirmary, though I participated in community life. There I saw Br. Tescelino, who is a close friend of yours, and he spoke about you. He explained the situation, and that it was impossible for him to write you because the rules at La Trapa do not permit it, and he said, “Br. Rafael, since you are going to be away from the monastery for a few months, why don’t you get in touch with my friend Marino? He needs like-minded friends to help him in his tribulation,” he said of you. “He suffers greatly, and since I cannot write him, you ought to.”

That’s all, Marino, my friend—if you’ll permit me to give you that title. I consented gladly to Br. Tescelino’s directive, and if my prayers for you and my letters give you some consolation . . . I’ll consider myself well paid.

In the world, nobody understands the feelings of affection rooted in charity and love for one’s neighbor to be found in the hearts of Jesus’s children.

See . . . you and I do not even know each other, and nevertheless we are very close to one another. You are suffering . . . and so am I. Finding myself at home, separated from my Trappist brothers, is a great trial that has caused me to shed many tears.

It is, then, a most obvious truth that those who truly love God also love one another.

I should like to wipe away your tears; I can tell they are truly bitter from your letters which Br. Tescelino gave me to read.



But do not lose heart in the battle; God has placed you in it . . . One cannot overcome if one does not fight . . . I speak from experience, because three years passed between the first moment I stepped into La Trapa and my decision to take the habit . . . and there was a little bit of everything.

You will suffer many attacks from the spirit of evil, who is God's enemy. When he sees a soul like yours, that wants to surrender itself entirely to God with generosity and without reserve, he redoubles his hostile efforts.

You will be tempted to despair. You will believe that God has abandoned you. You will even lose, or think you have lost, your faith . . . Is it not so? As you can see, I do not know you, and yet I can guess your moral battles rather easily.

And yet it must be a great consolation to know that you are not alone in the struggle . . . that people who desire the salvation of humanity are praying to God for you. Some do it in La Trapa, others in the world, but we all kneel down before the Tabernacle, for God is the same God over all the earth, and we pray to the good Jesus for our brother Marino.

Is it not beautiful, the great miracle that is love for one's neighbor?

How we love one another, we disciples of the One who died on a Cross . . . ! For us there is neither caste nor social class nor distance nor language. There is nothing but love of God . . . that is what unites us to one another so wonderfully, and the union becomes perfect when suffering is added to that.

God loves you very much when He makes you suffer in this way . . . It is proof of the affection He has for you, and if your conversion to God is sincere, as it clearly is, you must be prepared to carry your cross.

If only you knew how easy it is to do so, when you truly love Him! He carried His cross up to Calvary for the sake of us sinners . . . and we must pay Him back somehow, right?

I too was a sinner before going to La Trapa . . . and I can promise you that tears are purifying. Suffer with pleasure . . . suffer with faith, and when you believe God has left you, that is when He is closest to you.

You will not obtain your family's conversion with human reasoning either, for it is rather weak. You cannot realize any such endeavor. That is God's business . . . Let's allow Him to do it, for perhaps because of your merits, without your even realizing it . . . in the long run, God is the one who will bring about the transformation.

God often has need of the conversion of one soul for the salvation of many . . . And it matters not what environment surrounds them. The Christian martyrs of the early church needed the circus and its beasts in order to suffer for Christ and gain heaven . . .

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Now, in the middle of the twentieth century, we no longer need beasts, for it is enough just to live in the world . . . in this world where the material has overpowered the spiritual, where God is forgotten as if He did not exist . . . Humanity is dominated by unleashed passions and the hatreds of men. No . . . we no longer need the beasts of

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<sup>422</sup> *The circus and its beasts*: Under the Roman Empire, early Christians were martyred as a form of entertainment in large open areas called *circuses*. Rafael later alludes specifically to the circus of Nero, a site of martyrdom upon which Saint Peter's Basilica was built.

Nero's circus; it is enough to offer God the sacrifice of living among people who seem to hate God, and who blaspheme His name.

And so, when we see creatures who are distant from the Gospel and do not put its teachings into practice . . . we true Christians ought to extend our bonds of friendship, helping one another in mutual, fraternal affection, consoling one another in our sorrows . . . and, in a word, loving one another as Christ taught us.

Take heart, then, my friend Marino . . . You are fighting, but you are not fighting alone. Friends of yours, people you have never even met, are helping you with great strength.

Now that you know the reason for my letter, I hope you understand my reasons for writing it . . . If you think it indiscreet, tear it up and forget it . . . I am not asking you to reply, for I have no right to do so . . . I merely offer you my loyal, impartial friendship, and whatever else you might need of me. That is all I can offer you: support as you navigate doubts and uncertainties, prayers that you might continue down the path on which you have set out . . . I make this offer in all sincerity, as it should be between brothers in Christ.

With nothing further to add, an affectionate farewell from your friend

*Rafael Arnáiz*

C/O Argüelles 39, no. 3 – Oviedo.

If you write me, address me by my full name to avoid confusion with my father.

45. to W. Marino del Hierro

Oviedo, August 20, 1934

Feast of Saint Bernard<sup>423</sup>

My dear friend and brother in Christ,

I received your letter, for which I thank you very much, and through which I was able to glimpse your emotional state . . . and it does not surprise me in the least. What you are going through is rather natural; the world is against you, and as they say, you need to “swim against the current.” A time comes when it seems that you are not strong enough to do so, and you stop, and the water pulls you under, and you lose in two minutes the distance it had taken an hour for you to swim . . . is it not so? Pardon my simile, but I do not know how else to express this, and I am sure that you will understand me.

It is so difficult to contend with absolutely everyone. Eventually we find ourselves in low spirits, and we start to think, “Maybe *they* are the ones who are right? . . . Perhaps *I* am in the wrong? . . . ” We suffer . . . and as we suffer, as we find ourselves alone, perhaps we also shed tears . . . but it does not matter, for those tears are pleasing to God . . . Nor does it matter if one should lose ground, or fall time and again . . . The important thing is to get back up again and start over.

The spiritual life, the life of the Christian, is exactly that . . . we are always beginners . . . We never attain total peace, nor do we cease to offend God, at least until

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<sup>423</sup> *Saint Bernard*: Saint Bernard of Clairvaux (see Letter 42).

we leave this earth behind in death. The important thing is to reach the end . . . how often we fall is nothing to lose sleep over. In fact, it is necessary to fall, because this helps us to see our own smallness and our wretchedness, and to understand that we can never be at ease. For our passions shall never be subdued until death, and our entire lives are merely a struggle against them . . . As Jesus said, *the kingdom of God suffers violence*,<sup>424</sup> and when we truly love God, that violence is what we must overcome.

Anyway . . . what could I possibly tell you, poor wretch that I am? You ask me for wise advice . . . advice I can give you, but as for wisdom, God knows quite well that I can offer no such thing. Rather, all I can offer is my sincerest hope that you will benefit from it, and that it might console you.

In your letter, you made excessive mention of not being educated or cultured or lettered, and modesty is a good thing . . . but I myself am no Seneca, or any other Greek sage. Whatever education I have, if it does not help me get closer to God, it does not serve me well; in fact, it is useless to me . . . I was in my second year of studying to become an architect, and as soon as I realized that knowing mathematics and designing buildings would not get me to heaven, I left, taking up the hoe and potato peeler at La Trapa.

And so I left behind false erudition for true wisdom . . . In the world, people base their worth on what they know or the money they have, but God sees things differently . . . God looks at our hearts, not our minds. Therefore, do not worry if you are not a learned

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<sup>424</sup> See Matt 11:12; Luke 16:16.

man, as Saint Teresa said<sup>425</sup> . . . it is not at all necessary, and certainly not in order to communicate with me, since I am not one either. I should not like you to see me as a person who knows a great deal or very little, to be looked up to or looked down at . . . it's all the same. We are all brothers in God's eyes, and all the more so in our case.

I am very sorry that I cannot come see you . . . but who knows. I have family in Burgos, and it is very possible that our paths will cross there someday . . . anyway, let's not make plans. God will arrange whatever is best.

Do not be afraid of telling me whatever you wish in full confidence. Of course you can count on my discretion, and if you find some relief in writing to me, do it. Though I repeat once again, the help I can offer is so meager and my prayers so weak and poor, because I am in the same fight, believe me, and swimming against the current, like you . . . The world is rather evil, and wants nothing to do with God's friends.

In your letter, you told me that you are no longer going to Mass or receiving Communion . . . well, all I can tell you, and I speak from experience, is that when you are in the middle of a battle and you throw your weapons on the ground . . . For God's sake, Marino, my friend, do not lay yours down . . . Holy Mass and Communion are indispensable . . . and besides, it is so easy to go.

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<sup>425</sup> "If these learned men do not practice prayer their learning is of little help" (Saint Teresa of Ávila, *The Book of Her Life* [13.16], in *The Collected Works of Saint Teresa of Ávila*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodríguez [Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1976], 1:94).

If you feel no fervor—it doesn't matter. If you are weak and lukewarm—it doesn't matter . . . To receive the Lord, it is enough just to be in the state of grace . . . If you fall—it doesn't matter, you get back up. If you fall again, and again, and a hundred . . . no, a thousand times over—it doesn't matter. You get back up as many times as you fall. For what merit would we have if we did not? . . .

I remember one time I got into an argument with a friend because he told me that he did not receive Communion because he found himself unworthy, because he was a great sinner . . . My friend had faith and yet he still thought that way . . . What a shame! It took a lot for me to convince him that Jesus came down here and died on a cross precisely to seek out sinners, that is, the *sheep that find themselves outside the fold*,<sup>426</sup> and that if we wait until we are holy before drawing close to God . . . there would be no Blessed Sacrament.

Take heart, Marino, my friend. Draw close to God and tell Him everything on your mind . . . tell Him that you do nothing but offend Him . . . tell Him that you want to love Him but you don't know how, that doubts torment you. Tell Him to forgive you, cover yourself with ashes, and hide your face in shame . . . but talk to Him . . . you don't need devotionals or prayers. You'll see, God will console you . . .

So many times, so many, I have been through exactly what you are going through . . . and I drew close to God who is so good, and I told Him everything. Then when I left church, the world seemed completely different to me; I knew that I was a wretch and a sinner, but I knew that God loved me, a sinner, warts and all . . . God had heard me; my

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<sup>426</sup> See John 10:16.

prayer had been unfeeling, for I wanted to love Him and did not know how . . . but God looked at me and saw only a worthy desire, and I looked at Him and saw a Father who forgives all his son's faults and all his sins, no matter how horrible they might be . . .

Is not all this consoling? . . . Is it not true that if we are not good, it is because we do not want to be? . . . What does it matter if the world laughs? . . . Let them laugh. Someday, in the Valley of Jehoshaphat,<sup>427</sup> where we shall all be judged, we shall see laughter turned into tears, and the tears of sinners shall be turned into eternal joy.<sup>428</sup>

Cry, Marino, my friend . . . cry as much as you want, for not a single tear is wasted when God is the cause.

Regarding your doubts toward the faith, and the belief that nothing exists, have no fear . . . this is all part of the purification of your spirit . . . All the great converts went through the same thing . . . and *blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.*<sup>429</sup>

Thank you so much for the photographs. I'll return them in my next letter, along with some of my own so that you can see what I look like . . . although I am a very different person now from who I was a year before entering the convent.

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<sup>427</sup> Joel 3:2: *I will gather all the nations and bring them down to the valley of Jehoshaphat, and I will enter into judgment with them there.*

<sup>428</sup> See Luke 6:21,25; Rev 21:4.

<sup>429</sup> John 20:29.



I am waiting on a letter from La Trapa, and I still do not know if Br. Tescelino knows that I got in touch with you<sup>430</sup> . . . If you write him, send him my regards.

There are so many things I'd tell you, if I knew how to express them in a letter . . . Let us be satisfied with writing for now, but who knows . . . God uses all manner of things to console us, and so we can say nothing as to whether we might meet face to face someday.

I hope that in the next letter I receive from you, you will tell me that you have put things right with God, and that you have gone to Communion . . . Will you do this? From here, I am asking the Blessed Virgin to help you with all this . . . and I believe that She will hear my prayer.

Think on your brothers, the Trappists, who carry out their sacrificial life for the salvation of souls, and how Br. Tescelino is helping you from there . . . Anyway, I wanted to share all the faith and confidence I have in God with you . . . but these things cannot be communicated in words, let alone in words as poor as mine . . . But good will makes up for whatever is lacking in reason and conversation, right?

Marino, my friend: how great God is!! . . . How well He does everything, even when, with our weak human reason, we do not understand Him.

In this admirable symphony of creation, no detail is missing. When you believe that God has abandoned you or does not exist . . . lift your eyes to heaven, and do not look around at your fellow creatures, but rather recognize your littleness before the

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<sup>430</sup> See Letter 44.

Creator and exclaim . . . “Who am I, a miserable creature, to desire to understand God? Why does my reason insist on grasping at what it cannot fathom?”

Let us close our eyes and, alone with our consciences and without letting in any noise from this world, let us prostrate ourselves before the great Lord, whose mysteries we cannot understand with our human reason . . . precisely because we are humans and He is . . . God.

Well, perhaps I digress. Forgive me. It is just that for a Trappist, his whole life is reduced to a single word, God, and there is nothing outside of Him . . . The Trappist wants everyone to love God and to live in Him, and for all the nations to prostrate themselves before the altar . . . That is why he gets worked up when he speaks of God . . . Forgive me, but I want your heart to beat in unison with my own, for it to raise its voice above the misfortunes and sorrows and doubts, all the miseries and sins of this world, and let out an immense clamor of love for God . . . Someday, if God wills it, at La Trapa, you and I shall be in even closer communion . . . I certainly hope so . . .

What you must do is not be discouraged, and trust in Him, because He will put everything right. And then perhaps one day you will be able to see “my Trapa,” as you said in your letter, and call it your own too.

I do not wish to exhaust you any longer. Once more, I shall remind you that you can count on my discretion regarding everything you write me, and that you may see me as a true brother in whom to confide your sorrows.

Do you have a confessor? . . . Once you are settled somewhere, it is essential.

This is all for now; peace be with your spirit. An affectionate greeting from your friend and brother in Jesus and Mary,

Addington 219

*Rafael Arnáiz Barón*

C/O Argüelles, 39 – no. 3 – Oviedo

**46. to W. Marino del Hierro**

Oviedo, September 2, 1934

My dear brother in Christ,

I received your letter with great joy, for in it I can see God's immense grace with respect to your soul, without you even realizing how much.

I was in Burgos a few days ago with my father, who had some business to deal with there, and the other day I was in Santander, but for just a few hours. If I had known your address, I would have gladly come by to greet you . . . Another time.

Do not overanalyze my letters, because sometimes my ideas are a bit mixed up and you might glean something I did not mean to say . . . Just see good will in them.

Tell me when you are going to Burgos. I have good friends there who might be able to help you with anything you might need, and it's possible that I might go and spend some time there myself. Perhaps we'll end up there at the same time, and we could talk there, because really. . . it's so hard to express what one feels in a letter . . . don't you think? . . .

All I can say is that when I am with the Lord in Communion, I remember you and ask Him to give you enough strength and grace to bear your bitter sorrows. I do not ask Him to take them away from you, for when He sends them it is because He believes them necessary for our salvation and sanctification, and it is evidently true that we are not tested beyond what we can bear . . . Even those anxieties of suicide, when it seems like everything goes dark and the eyes of the soul cannot see God's light . . . , those thoughts, I mean . . . they'd be dangerous in someone else . . . but not in you. Even though I don't

know you quite well enough to say so, I think I can say that God is helping you through very effectively.

How beautiful faith is! . . . When it seems that a dark veil has been lowered over our eyes, we can know without a doubt that God is on the other side of it . . . What does it matter if we can see Him or not? What matters is knowing that He is there. *Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.*<sup>431</sup>

But it's not enough to believe . . . we must love. And by your letters, my friend Marino, I can plainly see that you love Him . . . but we must do even more than this . . . We must love Him above all things. And how hard that is! Only the saints achieved that, but then, the saints were human beings like us . . . Why, then, should we not achieve that too? What one person does with the grace of God, another can do too, with that same grace of God . . . This must be our one and only, unchanging aspiration, for once we have achieved it, we shall have neither sorrows nor joys, nor shall we be here nor there . . . it will all be the same to us, for *everything* will be God, and we shall love Him more than we do anyone else, and our very being and feeling shall all disappear before Him.

Let us not seek the consolation of men, when God alone can satisfy us entirely. Our sorrows shall disappear, for when we cease to think of ourselves, we shall be less selfish; and our heart, body, and lips will all speak only one word . . . God.

But unfortunately that is not how we are. We are not saints, far from it; we worry about ourselves too much. We want a God who will comfort us and make our lives easy, and when God tests us a bit, we rebel against Him, not understanding that what God

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<sup>431</sup> John 20:29.

wants from us is not discipline and mortifications we choose ourselves, but rather for us to do His will even when it is difficult. And the more difficult it is, the more tears we shed, the better . . .

Marino, do not despair, my friend. When your sorrows make you cry, and the bitter grief of this life upsets you greatly, think about how it is not worth it to shed even a single tear over not being happy on this earth . . . Try not to think about yourself, for we are mere maggots, made of clay and full of misery . . . Treat your body austerely, and pay no mind to the suffering of your spirit . . . Think of nothing but God, and as you say so well in your letter, “only You and everything for You” . . .

If the ground falls out from under you, then it falls. If humanity treats you worse than a dog . . . what does it matter. Do you deserve better? . . . If you have neither health nor wellbeing, but instead only sorrows, and you do nothing but cry . . . what does all that matter when you have God? . . .

And you’ll say to me, “What about my past life? And all my horrible sins?” And I say to you . . . your past life *is past*, and your sins have been forgiven you, and if it’s true that you have truly found God, your joy at knowing Him should be greater than your sorrow for having gone so long not knowing Him. And if it is good to cry for your sins and your ingratitude, it is also *necessary* to sing songs of joy at discovering, knowing, and loving a God like ours.

As such, forget yourself. Your time on this earth is short; your tears will not last forever, and above all your afflictions are God and the Blessed Virgin who watch over you.

What else can I say to you? . . . Nothing. Someday soon, when we are at rest in the Lord, we shall see that all these activities and worries that kept us busy down here below were natural and human, because we are people after all, but seen rightly, none of it was worth thinking about, and all the time we spent thinking about ourselves was time wasted, time that we should have devoted to God.

Pardon my sermon, I might be a bit annoying but you'll forgive me. And if my letters offer you any consolation, however little, then I will continue to send them as long it is in my power to do so.

Keep going to Communion often, and don't stop praying the Holy Rosary to the Blessed Virgin, and praying for me from time to time. I need your prayers a lot, because it's true what they say, it's one thing to preach and another thing to practice.

Don't let anything or anyone discourage you, and open up your heart, as I suppose you already have, to your confessor and spiritual director, but above all, remember what I said in my last letter . . . everything you experience, everything you think: tell the Lord about it. And when you are tempted, turn to the Virgin, for Our Lady will never desert you.

I am returning the photos you sent me, and sending one of my own (I couldn't find any more). It's from last year, when I served in Madrid, so I am in uniform as a "sapper-engineer."<sup>432</sup>

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<sup>432</sup> Rafael served in the Regiment of Sappers and Miners, or combat engineers (see Letter 34).

Has Br. Tescelino<sup>433</sup> written to you?

When you write him, give him my regards. Don't stop writing me as much as you want and about whatever you wish, for in me you have a brother in Jesus and Mary. A big hug,

*Rafael Arnáiz*

I have taken the liberty of keeping one of the photos you sent. I have some negatives on hand to develop, which I will then send you.

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<sup>433</sup> Br. Tescelino Arribas Jimeno (see Letter 42).



47. to Fr. Vicente Pardo<sup>434</sup>

Oviedo, September 3, 1934

Dear Fr. Vicente,

I should have written you days ago to send you the books I promised. Forgive the delay, which was due to my being away from Oviedo; besides, I had to order the books from Madrid, because they were not available here.

Mr. Laredo, my doctor,<sup>435</sup> would gladly lend you whatever you need, but I thought it preferable for the books to belong to the infirmary's library, so I've bought them instead. Sound good to you? . . . Well, whether it sounds good to you or not, it's done.

You'll receive three thick volumes in the mail, chock full of horrible illnesses, and in a few days, another one that hasn't arrived yet: *Caring for the Mentally Ill* by Valenciano.<sup>436</sup> The doctor told me that it's specifically addressed to nurses, and should interest an infirmarian. Along with that, I'm also sending you Father Laburu's Lenten

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<sup>434</sup> *Fr. Vicente Pardo Feliú*: the infirmarian at San Isidro (see Letter 35).

<sup>435</sup> *Mr. Laredo*: The Arnáiz-Barón family doctor, until his death in the Spanish Civil War (OC 315).

<sup>436</sup> Luis Valenciano Gayá, *La asistencia al enfermo mental* (Madrid: Publ. de Archivos de Neurobiología, 1933). This manual was specifically addressed to psychiatric nurses.

conferences.<sup>437</sup> Tell me if you find them useful and if these are the ones you had wanted to read, and I beg you to tell me if you need anything else, whatever it may be. My father and I are both entirely at your service . . . and above all, I cannot easily forget my good Father Infirmarian.

Regarding my illness, I'll tell you that I'm continuing to improve at a rapid pace. I've been taking two and a half units of insulin, which is hardly any at all, and starting today I won't take anything at all; my sugar levels have dropped to zero, and soon I'll start that starch diet. Everything is going exactly as you told me it would, though I can't wait to put my novice's cape back on. It shall be when God wishes, though I continue to beg the Virgin to make me healthy soon; I suppose you pray for this too from time to time.

I imagine that Father Marcelo will have received a letter from me,<sup>438</sup> and if you see him, give him my regards and tell him I'll write him again one of these days. My father wants some Masses said for the soul of an elderly aunt of mine who passed away a few days ago.<sup>439</sup>

Give Br. Tescelino a hug for me, my affectionate greetings to Reverend Father Abbot, and all my love to you as your brother who asks your blessing,

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<sup>437</sup> Father José Antonio Laburu Olascoaga, S.J. (1887–1972) was a psychologist, Jesuit priest, and author of both religious and medical texts. The book Rafael cites here is *¿Jesucristo es Dios? conferencias cuaresmales* (Madrid: Ediciones «Fax», 1933).

<sup>438</sup> This would be the letter of August 11, 1934 (Letter 42).

<sup>439</sup> Rafael's great-aunt, Petra Sánchez de la Campa Tasquer (see Letter 29).

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*Rafael*

C/O Argüelles 39, no. 3 – Oviedo

48. to Fr. Francisco Díez<sup>440</sup>

Oviedo, September 15, 1934

My dear Fr. Francisco,

I received your card, for which I greatly thank you. You cannot imagine the consolation I receive in knowing that people who are so beloved to me, as all of you are, remember their poor brother Rafael, who might need some bodily care, but needs your prayers all the more.

You spoke of my constancy in my vocation, and I'll tell you this, Father Francisco: my vocation is increasingly steadfast and sure, and with every day that goes by I am more and more convinced that my place is in La Trapa . . . I think of nothing else, and if I long for health, it is so that I might return to my beloved Trapa. I can assure you that my confidence in God is such that I am *sure* that I will once more take up my honorable office as an altar server, which I liked so much.<sup>441</sup>

I am getting better every day, and according to the doctor, I am now cured of my diabetes. For many days now I haven't been taking any medication at all, and now the only thing I am focused on is getting used to the monastic diet again, little by little . . . The other day I ate a great big plate of white beans, and when I did the analysis afterwards, there wasn't any sugar in my urine at all. On Monday I'll repeat this test, and

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<sup>440</sup> Fr. Francisco Díez Martínez was the sub-master, or assistant to the master of novices, at San Isidro (see Letter 33).

<sup>441</sup> *Altar server*: see Letter 33.

at first it'll just be once a week, but then twice a week, and so on, slowly by slowly getting my body back to its normal state . . . Have no doubt that it will, for the Blessed Virgin's help is very effective.

Please keep praying to Saint Thérèse for your novice, that I will return to you soon, and leave the world behind for good. It is full of dangers that, even as God upholds me, I cannot dismiss—and great ones indeed.

If you could see how much I miss the silence of La Trapa! That silence among men, that silence that draws us so close to God . . . ! Here, it is the opposite . . . they talk a lot about everything but speak very little of God; nothing to be done about that, and I offer it all to Him. When I was in La Trapa, I offered Him my silence and all the austerities of the Rule;<sup>442</sup> here in the world, I offer Him my secular life and my interactions with people and all the consequences thereof . . . That's how God wants it, so that's how it should be. But I promise you, what I'm offering Him now is much harder for me than the entire Rule of Saint Benedict observed with maximum severity.

I can't tell you anything happening here that would interest you. On the contrary, it's as if you and I lived on different planets. What happens on mine cannot interest you, but everything that happens on yours interests me greatly.

I am and continue to be Trappist, though not on the outside; on the inside I've got a habit on and everything . . . How I long to put it back on and never take it off again. May I be buried in it, so that one day, when God calls me forth to His presence, I can

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<sup>442</sup> *The Rule*: The Rule of Saint Benedict (see Manuscript 7).

present myself to Him wearing the monastic cowl. That is my only goal, my only aspiration; and as you can see, it is a rather simple one.

Many people, upon learning of my firm decision to return to La Trapa, some admire me for it and others think I'm crazy . . . But God, who knows all things, correctly sees that neither is correct. I am neither a hero, as many people think I am, nor a man who has lost his mind . . . But rather, all that is happening is that I have simply put my hand to the plow . . . and I don't want to look back.<sup>443</sup> And if I were to turn back now that recovery is in sight, I could never be forgiven . . . nor could I even think to do such a thing.

I know I must take up the fight once more, and perhaps with even greater intensity than before . . . I know that very bitter days lie ahead for me . . . I know that the cross lies ahead . . . But what about God? . . . And my salvation? . . . I am not going to stop following the call of the One who died for us sinners . . . All that is what people don't understand, but I don't care. There is a barrier between the world and my soul . . . In that barrier, darkness reigns . . . Oh, Father Francisco, there are so many things I'd like to tell you about what is happening in my soul, but I don't know how to express them . . . But you, a Trappist, can understand me perfectly without needing me to explain anything.

Anyway . . . let everyone follow their own path . . . but mine is clear.

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<sup>443</sup> Luke 9:62: *Jesus said to him, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."*

The other day I sent Father Vicente a letter and five books, I don't know if he'll have received them by now.<sup>444</sup> Ask him, just in case you need to file a claim with the post office. I have nothing else in particular to tell you.

I'll write to my beloved co-novices another day; give them my regards. The same to Reverend Father Abbot and Father Master.<sup>445</sup> A big hug from your novice, who entrusts himself to your prayers,

*Brother M. Rafael*

I'm sending you two photos I have. I took them before I entered La Trapa, so I have a mustache, which I don't now, but I imagine it's all the same to you. In these photos I was in the tallest building in Madrid, and I took them just days before leaving the Spanish capital forever.

I also promised a few to Fr. Buenaventura,<sup>446</sup> and I'll send him some another day, along with a long letter. Please tell him so for me (if it is permitted).

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<sup>444</sup> *Father Vicente*: the infirmarian at San Isidro (see Letter 35). Rafael is referring to the letter of September 3, 1934 (see Letter 47).

<sup>445</sup> *Reverend Father Abbot and Father Master*: Dom Félix Alonso García (see Letter 5) and Fr. Marcelo León (see Letter 18).

<sup>446</sup> Fr. Buenaventura Ramos Caballero (see Letter 42).

49. to Rosa Calvo<sup>447</sup>

Oviedo, September 15, 1934

My dear Aunt Rosa,

For a long time now, I've been thinking of writing you. Now that I happen to be away from my beloved monastery, I have taken up my pen to write you just a quick note, telling you that I have not forgotten about my dear Rosica, whom I imagine, as always, praising God every time she presses a stamp onto a lottery ticket.

First of all, I'll give you the news about Merceditas,<sup>448</sup> whose health, thank God, continues to improve, however slowly . . . She is eating well, though not enthusiastically. According to the doctor, it'll all be easily resolved.

As for the other one . . . the novice, I'll say that he's almost entirely recovered; he can eat everything again, and he's off the medication. I think he'll be back in his white habit soon, returning to his life at La Trapa.

Dear Aunt Rosa, if you knew how much I desire it . . . Sometimes I think having such a strong desire is not very perfect of me . . . but once you have tasted the sweetness and gentleness of the Lord, nothing else pleases you . . . Is it not so? If only you knew how much He loves me . . . This illness He sent me is proof of it. Both when I was at death's door and now that I have a new lease on life, I have never ceased to give Him thanks for everything.

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<sup>447</sup> Rosa Calvo was a family friend and a lottery administrator in Toro (see Letter 8).

<sup>448</sup> *Merceditas*: Rafael's younger sister, Mercedes Arnáiz Barón.



There are so many things I'd tell you about La Trapa if I were in Toro . . . In Toro, where my greatest pleasure was to talk of pious things at the lottery, remember? . . . From time to time, before the Tabernacle at La Trapa, I'd think of the administrator there, in that lottery building painted yellow on the outside, with very few *pesetas* inside . . . but a whole lot of love for God.

You see how everything finds its way, even when it seems impossible, but nothing is impossible for God.<sup>449</sup> Do you remember that dandy little boy who came to Toro one day with his uncle Polín? Well, even though you might imagine me in white sackcloth with a shaved head, I'm still that same little boy, and I suspect I haven't changed much to you.

I don't know if we'll see each other one of these days . . . God knows. But someday, in heaven, at the Virgin's side, we'll resume our chats about God. What are earthly things to us, right? Despite being separated by distance, we are united in the Tabernacle, for Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament is the same in La Colegiata of Toro<sup>450</sup> as He is in La Trapa of Venta de Baños. Don't forget to pray for me before Him from time to time . . . I do the same for you . . . That He might send you sorrows and afflictions . . . disillusionment . . . in a word, that He might send you your cross . . . As you can see, I love you in the Trappist style: if love for God unites us creatures, carrying the cross the

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<sup>449</sup> Luke 1:37.

<sup>450</sup> *La Colegiata*: La Colegiata Santa María la Mayor ("the Collegiate Church of Saint Mary the Great") is a twelfth-century church in Toro, a few blocks from where Rosa Calvo worked at the Lottery.

Lord carried unites us to Him, which is what should matter to us . . . And when we suffer everything with love, charity, and joy . . . then what more could we desire or ask for? Nothing, Aunt Rosa . . . nothing. If we were as we ought to be, we wouldn't ask Him even for that . . . It would all be cut away, leaving only the fulfillment of His divine will.

Well, pardon my sermon. Despite being away from my convent, my inner Trappist almost always comes out, even when I don't mean for it to.

I'm sending you two photos of myself from before I went to La Trapa. I'm sending you them not because my humble personage holds any interest for you, but rather so that you can put them in your books, and whenever you come across them you can say this to the Lord: "Lord, you see this ridiculous-looking man with that mustache, who left everything behind to follow you up to the summit of Calvary? Well, I won't tell you to listen to him, because he doesn't deserve it. But Lord, do pity him from time to time." If you were to say that to the Lord just once, Aunt Rosa, I'd be happy with that.

I won't tell you to write me, because I know your eyes cause you a lot of trouble . . . You don't owe me a thing, and I've only written you because I felt inspired to, that's all.

Tell my grandmother and Aunt María<sup>451</sup> that I'll write them another day and give them the latest news about Merceditas . . . That poor girl, the Lord loves her very much too . . . but then, whom does He not love? . . . It seems impossible that we should remain

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<sup>451</sup> Rafael's maternal grandmother, Fernanda Torres Erro, and his aunt, María Josefa Barón Torres, lived together in Toro.

in the dark about that, and go about our lives occupied and busy with so many things, and all the while we have forgotten about such a good God.

I'm telling you: after spending time at a Trappist monastery, where everything is centered around Jesus and Our Lady, in community life with men who have forgotten the world and its miseries, whose only occupation is to become saints . . . After adjusting to their way of life, fighting alongside them on the harsh path of the Rule of Saint Benedict (well, that bit about it being "harsh" is just an expression, I didn't think it was that hard) . . . As I've told you, after realizing that in a Trappist monastery absolutely everything is focused on the greater glory of God . . . After all this, realizing that the world is so indifferent to the Master's concerns . . . It makes me sad, Aunt Rosa, to see people be so blind.

But there's nothing to be done about that . . . I don't think people are bad. I love them all, and I suffer to see humanity suffer when the cure for all their sorrows is so near . . . All they have to do is look up a bit. How many tears would dry and how many sorrows would be consoled when they see Jesus . . . but instead, all we see is . . . people's hatred for one another, all of them or nearly all of them busy with wicked and petty matters, never lifting their eyes to God. It is as if He did not exist to them, and as if He were not going to judge them someday . . . How sad! Must one be a Trappist to understand this? No . . . one need not be a Trappist to shed tears for all humanity . . . Perhaps the Trappist sees it all more clearly, as I do now . . . But just a bit of divine light is enough to make the scales fall from your eyes, and make you realize that great darkness reigns over this world . . . You see that, right, Aunt Rosa? . . . Anyway, I don't know why I'm telling you all this . . . Maybe because I carry it all deep inside me, and if

it's true that we love God, it must make us sad to see that so many people don't even know Him.

That is the apostolate of the Trappist, to pray for those who do not pray, and to love God because they do not love Him; if anyone tells you that religious are selfish, that all they think about is their own salvation . . . you tell them that you know a Trappist who asks for nothing for himself in prayer, and who has dedicated his life to God in order to make reparation for all the offenses that people commit against Him.

Well, Aunt Rosa, I don't want to annoy you. May God so desire to take me back to La Trapa soon, so that I can take up my plow again, and there, in silence, without the world noticing, keep praying for everyone, and for that lottery administrator in Toro, that *poor woman* you know, with the white hair and the bad eyesight and quite a few years behind her and . . . with quite a bit of love for God, I think.

All my love, your brother,<sup>452</sup>

*Rafael*

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<sup>452</sup> That is, "your brother in Christ." Though Rafael affectionally called Rosa Calvo his "aunt," the two were not related.

**50. to W. Marino del Hierro**

Oviedo, September 18, 1934

My dear friend and brother Marino,

When I received your last letter, it was impossible for me to write you back at Santander without your address, so I sent a card to your house asking after your address in Burgos.

Now that I have it, I'm writing you, although in truth I have little to tell you that you do not already know, but if my letters cheer you up, then blessed be God, who uses an insignificant thing like me to cheer up that heart of yours that evidently suffers so much.

You told me in your letter that you do not repay the grace God gives you, even though you know Jesus loves you, and that you don't reciprocate that love either . . . And now, Marino, my friend, I ask you . . . who among creatures truly returns unto God all His benefits? What soul loves God with all its might and in the same measure that God loves us? . . . We human beings are so stingy that we find it difficult to love God even a little bit.

But don't you worry, one thing is certain: wanting to love God is loving Him. And it's also true that if it is a special *grace* to know that God loves us . . . it is just as much a grace from God to recognize our own misery and weakness, how often we fall and fall again into sin . . .

Lastly, it's a grace from God to know, as you know quite well, that God loves you very much, even if you don't reciprocate . . . that God loves you despite all your failings,

despite your sins, despite you not loving Him back . . . You know all that perfectly well, it's evident from your letters . . . and all that, Marino, my friend, is a very great grace from God.

You asked me to give you an honest answer on this matter . . . and I am nobody, and I hardly have any experience, but I dare to speak to you this way because this is how I think . . . perhaps I am wrong, but who isn't wrong from time to time?

The other day, after going to Confession . . . I usually read the seven penitential psalms,<sup>453</sup> which I recommend you do as well, and when I got to Psalm 51, I thought of my brother Marino . . . The verse says: *The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise . . .*<sup>454</sup> King David's words are so beautiful, and so consoling . . . !

As such, what is most pleasing to God is not any great penance or arduous austerity . . . or even ecstasies of divine love . . . What is most pleasing to God is a contrite heart . . . and from your letters, my brother Marino, I can tell that you have one.

Therefore, do not desire to do great things, and envy no one; perhaps someone you think is closer to God than you are . . . is in fact further away. Sometimes appearances can be deceiving, and you'll say, "I wish I were like so-and-so . . . they *really* love God . . ." but then, as I said, that's not at all the case.

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<sup>453</sup> *The seven penitential psalms*: Psalms 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, and 143 are often prayed together as an expression of repentance.

<sup>454</sup> Ps 51:17.

Be content to be what you are . . . of course wanting to love God more is a great virtue, but falling into despair and despondency when we do not get where we want to go is not virtue . . .

Leave it all to God, then, and He will take care of leading you wherever He pleases. Meanwhile, I envy your “spirit of compunction” . . . Weep for your sins, consider yourself the most vile and despicable of men, and be ashamed of your misery and all your weaknesses before God; for in considering yourself despicable, and humbling your heart before Jesus, have no doubt that you are offering the most pleasing of sacrifices, as King David says.

Forgive me for resorting to citing sacred texts. On my own I know nothing, but we can always find balm for our wounds in the Sacred Scriptures . . . I read them often, and when we read the divine Word there, it seems as if everything quiets down, and we have greater peace of spirit . . . Don’t stop reading them, and very often; don’t ever stop. If we had true faith, that would be the only book we’d ever have close at hand.

On the one hand, I’m glad that Br. Tescelino is with you, though on the other I feel bad for him, because I know what it is to leave La Trapa, even if only for a few days . . . Give him a big hug for me, and I hope we will be reunited in our monastery soon . . . whenever God wants.

You said in your letter that you want to be in Burgos already, because there you will devote yourself to thinking about God more frequently . . . I’ll pray that it be so.

Now you will be able to devote yourself to talking about God very frequently. That’s what Br. Tescelino is for, and I imagine he’s quite good at it . . . I’d enjoy receiving a letter from him so much . . . You could say I hardly know him, for we’ve only

spoken a couple of times . . . But it's as if I knew him my whole life, because he's a Trappist, and something unites us Trappists to one another . . . I'm sure Brother can explain it to you.

I hope your appendicitis operation goes well. It's not dangerous, and I trust that the Lord will make it turn out well.

I have nothing else to tell you, my friend Marino. Write me when you'd like, for I always receive your letters with true joy . . . Talk to me about God, about the Blessed Virgin . . . it is so sweet and so consoling to talk about Him . . . always Him.

I continue to get much better from my illness. It's slow and steady, but my recovery, relying on Mary's protection as I always do, is a sure thing . . . I have no desire for health except insofar as it will allow me to return to my beloved Trapa forever, and I know that God wants me there . . . This illness He sent me, though it may seem to be the opposite, is proof of that, because if I had a vocation before . . . now it has grown even stronger. When the Lord provides a vocation like mine, even if He places obstacles in its path, He always provides a way to keep moving forward. All one must do is never lose faith in Him, and obey His holy will.

I don't know when I'll be in Burgos . . . When are you going to do your military service? What about Br. Tescelino?

If you need anything, I have an uncle there, one of my mother's brothers. He is very good and very Christian, and he lives in Burgos, and I do not doubt he would assist you with anything you needed. His name is Álvaro Barón and he lives at Aparicio Ruiz 18; I don't remember which floor.



Take heart, then, my friend Marino, and don't let anything or anyone discourage you . . . God sees you, God loves you, and God will help you with everything . . . Pray a lot to the Virgin, for it is through that Blessed Lady's intercession that we receive all that we have. It is rare that I do not remember you at Holy Communion . . . I hope you pray for me too, because I need it a lot . . . more than most.

I'm sending you a photo I found from before I entered La Trapa. I'm wearing street clothes, and I'm at the top of the Capitol Cinema Building in Madrid, on the terrace.<sup>455</sup> If you send me one back, send me a small one, so I can keep it in a book . . . I like to keep photos in my devotionals . . . I'd be grateful.

That is all; I await your reply. A big hug from your friend and brother in Christ,

*Rafael*

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<sup>455</sup> *Capitol Cinema Building*: Also known as the Carrión Building, the Capitol Cinema is across the street from the boarding house where Rafael lived on Plaza de Callao in Madrid (see Letter 9).

**51. *The Trappist's Apologia*<sup>456</sup>**

Oviedo, September 19, 1934

God before all else.

With the aid of the Blessed Virgin, to whom I commend myself before beginning this notebook, and with the help of the Holy Spirit, who I hope will enlighten me and prevent me from falling into any error contrary to the Holy, Roman, Catholic, and Apostolic Faith.

I am writing for two reasons: first, because I believe that writing and thinking about the things of God greatly profits my soul, and delights my spirit, which rejoices at the mention of God, and second, because I have time at my disposal, and so I ought to use it in a way that serves the greater glory of God.

If someone should read these lines someday, I ask the reader only for great charity . . . Do not take them for doctrine or teachings, for I attempt no such thing. I write only what I think, what comes to mind, and in a simple way, with no literary aims . . . In these pages I am studying my own soul and my impressions, with no determined plan or set order . . . As such, I repeat, if some curious person should read them (which I will ensure

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<sup>456</sup> This title is not original to the manuscript, but was added by Rafael's confessor and biographer, Fr. Teófilo Sandoval Fernández (Juan Antonio Martínez Camino, *Mi Rafael: el Beato Rafael Arnáiz, según el Padre Teófilo Sandoval, su confesor, intérprete y editor* [Bilbao: Desclée de Brouwer, 2003], 173). Rafael wrote this manuscript between September 19 and October 5, 1934 (OC 329).

that no one does), I ask for nothing more than that . . . *charity*; that is, a benevolent spirit and understanding. If at any point these pages bring a smile to the reader's lips, may that reader see here only a person who says what he is feeling, even if he might say foolish things sometimes.

I am a Trappist, and I feel, see, and think like a Trappist . . . Trappists are nothing out of the ordinary . . . not exceptional or strange in the least. Trappists are above all human beings just like anyone else, created by God like anyone else . . . Each has their own misfortunes and weaknesses, a body to contend with and a soul to save . . . That's all . . . God demands of them a few things that are simple and *pleasant* to carry out here on earth.

First among them is that the Trappist ought not desire anything but what God desires. He must be the Trappist's only occupation, their only desire, their only love and occupation . . . They must be filled with the Spirit of God, and all their actions in this life must be oriented toward Him alone and His greater glory, and done in His name.

Evidently, the Trappist's occupation is quite simple. It requires no great study or preparation. No exceptional qualities are needed, contrary to popular belief. No need to force it, or cause any harm to oneself . . . One need only "love God above all things,"<sup>457</sup> and that is so pleasant, so sweet, that one might say that the Trappist's occupation on earth is the most *pleasant* of all occupations, the most *divine*, the most *useful* if I can employ such a word . . . When people ask me, "Tell me, what do you do in La Trapa?" . . . Many times I have wanted to answer, "Well, it's pretty simple . . . love God and let

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<sup>457</sup> See Deut 6:5; Matt 22:37; Mark 12:30; Luke 10:27.

ourselves be loved by Him, that's all . . ." But the Trappist's occupation in the monastery goes unnoticed by the world, because the world is too busy with other things to understand that . . . The world looks at a Trappist and just sees someone who doesn't bathe and doesn't eat anything but bread and beans and doesn't ever talk . . . And of course, seen from that perspective alone, it is *odd*.

The other day I came across an old schoolmate of mine, a good kid and a good Christian. Naturally, we started talking about La Trapa, and I told him that when I was entirely recovered I'd be going back there, returning to my monastery . . . Well, without trying to offend me, far be it from him to do such a thing, he did call me selfish and half suicidal, and on top of all that, dirty. It didn't offend me, because I understand that he is in the world . . . and that's how the world is, it sees only what is external, what is counter to its own ways: an indulgent, comfortable life, eating well, talking and singing and listening to music, washing and bathing . . . In short, whatever pertains to the body . . . Meanwhile, for a Trappist, the body is just a bit of clay not worth paying any attention to . . . it gets in their way, so they treat it poorly and master it . . . What does the body matter?! . . . But the soul, on the other hand, they make sure to keep spotless and sparkling, free of the mud of human appetites, utterly tranquil . . . resting in God and singing to the Virgin . . . and the world doesn't see that because it cannot, because it doesn't care, because . . . that's how it is . . . it's the world.

It is plain to see, then, that love for God is incompatible with the spirit of the world. As such, when I hear it said that serving God in the cloister is the same as serving Him in the world, I cannot help but smile, because I can clearly see that the world is an enemy of God. You can't make a deal with an enemy of God, no matter how trivial, or

grant any concession, because if you concede just this one thing, soon enough it'll be two, and then three, and then all of a sudden we're completely overtaken.

The spirit of the world creeps in everywhere. Without even realizing it, it infiltrates families and dominates society, judgments and opinions, ideas, even the way we see God . . . It even gets into convents. Thus, its characteristic subtlety is what makes it dangerous.

One often sees very holy people nevertheless ruled, in part, by the world . . . it can even be seen in sermons and in preaching, in laity and religious alike . . . and those who let themselves be influenced by it . . . don't even realize it.

No, serving God in the cloister is not the same as serving Him in the world . . . Serving Him in the world is much harder. Hence the immediate question: "Am I a coward? . . . I am fleeing from it." Maybe it's cowardice, but I figure when we come across an enormous boulder that stands in our way, it's a mark of good sense to jump over it rather than waste time and energy trying to get it out of the way with drills or crowbars . . . It's better, and more *certain*, to put yourself in God's hands, get a running start, and jump on over, rather than to fight the obstacle tooth and nail. We run the risk of destroying our hands and ending up getting hurt in the process.

Another thing: when they tell me that you can be saved here just as you can be saved there . . . of course your soul can be saved anyplace, because God's help is everywhere, and so long as we desire to serve Him with all our strength, place and position and circumstance are all irrelevant.

But I say that if the young man who drew near to Jesus to follow Him had not been frightened away by needing to "jump" over his parents and his fortune, and had

made the decision and had the courage to jump . . . surely Jesus would not have been so sad.<sup>458</sup> And so, if some people think it is cowardice to leave behind the world and all its creatures to follow Jesus, sometimes it is also cowardice, and a much greater one, to lack the courage to jump.

On the other hand, I know from experience that renouncing everything is no easy thing . . . I understand the doubts of that young man who did not follow Jesus because he was rich very well . . . surely he was not happy with all his wealth after the answer he received from Jesus of Nazareth. Who knows if his wealth later became an obstacle to his salvation . . . When he found himself without the strength to leave it all behind, his distress must have been terrible . . . When He saw that this young man would not give his heart over to Him fully, all because of a fistful of wretched, ephemeral riches, the Lord's smile must have been very bitter.

Do not judge, therefore, O world! someone who, for the love of God and the salvation of his soul, is leaving you behind and abandoning you . . . What do you have to offer? . . . Misery, lies, vanities, everything false and fleeting. Meanwhile, what does He have to give me? Oh, you don't understand what our good Jesus gives me . . . Jesus gives me *everything*, for He gives me His Heart, and He counts me among His guests at the great banquet; therefore, let me follow Him . . . and don't get in my way, because I'll jump over you as many times as I have to . . . and if God doesn't give me the strength to jump, I'll fight you with my own hands and feet . . . You are God's enemy, and thus you are also mine.

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<sup>458</sup> See Matt 19:19–22; Mark 10:17–22; Luke 18:18–23.

God has taken me out of my Trapa in order to have me fight against you . . . and so I will fight; God commands it, and so it shall be.

You've beaten me from time to time, but I am not discouraged; defeat makes triumph sweeter . . . I am weak and miserable, but I have a champion on my side who is not on yours: the Blessed Virgin Mary . . . At Her side, I will advance as far as God wishes me to go, and while you could defeat me, you don't stand a chance against Her . . . She is invincible. She will thwart your worldly spirit, and everything you offer me fades away, becoming insignificant when the Blessed Virgin Mary turns Her gaze toward me . . . and I know that She loves me very much.

But, in short . . . what is the world and what are its dangers? The English writer, Father Faber, defines it admirably in his book *The Creator and the Creature* and truly, profoundly, impresses upon his reader's soul what the world really is:

There is a hell already upon the earth; there is something which is excommunicated from God's smile. It is not altogether matter, nor yet altogether spirit. It is not man only, nor Satan only, nor is it exactly sin. It is an infection, an inspiration, an atmosphere, a life, a colouring matter, a pageantry, a fashion, a taste, a witchery, an impersonal but a very recognizable system. None of these names suit it, and yet all of them suit it. Scripture calls it, "The World." God's mercy does not enter into it. . . .

We are living in it, breathing it, acting under its influences, being cheated by its appearances, and unwarily admitting its principles. . . .

It has its gentle voice, its winning manners, its insinuating address, its aspect of beauty and attraction. . . . It can be dignified as well. It can call to order sin which is not respectable. It can propound wise maxims of public decency, and inspire wholesome regulations of police. . . .

Or there again it is, with high principles on its lips, discussing the religious vocation of some youth, and praising God and sanctity, while it urges discreet delay, and less self-trust.<sup>459</sup>

Thus Father Faber speaks in his book, in his chapter on the world . . . There is a lot to savor in what he says, but still, there comes a point where I am no longer in agreement with him. When he talks about how we true Christians ought to view the world, he says there are two ways of looking at it. The first is in a somber fashion: everything is bad and sinful, it's all dangerous, everything is sad and condemned . . . He talks about a funeral on a wet day as a representation of the state of those who look at the world this way.<sup>460</sup>

The other view is the exact opposite. He calls Saint Bernard the prophet of the first view, and Saint Francis de Sales the prophet of the second, and he supposes that monks are gloomy and dark, lacking for joy . . . He considers that way of thinking about

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<sup>459</sup> Frederick William Faber, *The Creator and the Creature; Or the Wonders of Divine Love* (London: T. Richardson and Son, 1857), 372–373.

<sup>460</sup> “Let us live as ancient monarchs lived, in daily fear of poison in every dish. A funeral on a wet day in a disconsolate churchyard, this is the type of the minds who take this view” (Faber, *The Creator*, 391).



the world necessary to be a contemplative . . . and that the monk encloses himself in the cloister in order to think horrible thoughts about the world, in which he sees nothing but misery, danger, sin, and condemnation . . . and the way I see it (though who am I to weigh in), I don't think that's the case, at least it's not for me.

I see creation as very beautiful; I delight in the souls of those who love God . . . Life is not sad when you have God . . . The sun is shining, and I enjoy flowers and birds and children. *Everything* is a reason to praise God: stars, nighttime, fields covered in light. In a Trappist monastery, you delight in all such things, because they all bring you closer to God . . . While it is true that the monk weeps for the sins of men, he also sings the wondrous deeds of the Creator.

The monk is joyful and happy to see the goodness of God reflected in His creatures, to taste the mercy and love of Jesus . . . He thanks Him for having removed him from a world full of danger and sin, it is true, but that is not all there is in the world. There is also pure affection in the world, and holy joys . . . It's not all desolation and misery, for there are smiles among tears, and despite their thorns, flowers are quite beautiful.

When the monk retires to the cloister, it is in order to praise God more easily, without distractions . . . The psalter and silence help him to do that. He thinks of those who are miserable on earth, and of those who are happy, begging mercy for all.

When I decided to go to La Trapa, it wasn't out of fear of the world, or because I was sad to realize that all it could give me was lies and deceit. My eyes hadn't been opened, first of all, because in order to have one's eyes opened, they must first be shut, and the world had never pulled the wool over mine. And secondly, my life had just hardly

begun—I don't think twenty-one years constitute enough experience for me to have emphatically proclaimed in a resounding voice, "I'm off to the cloister, for I am disillusioned with life, and so with sorrowful countenance I retire to monastic solitude to weep for my sins . . ." No, none of that.

My life was in full bloom, and it held me in its embrace, and God spoiled me . . . The world didn't pull the wool over my eyes because it couldn't. I saw clearly, because I had God on my side; I'm joyful by nature, and I was happy . . . I enjoyed music, and nature; I hardly had time to get to know the world . . . I saw it up close, but that's it. That was all, and nevertheless, I went off to La Trapa. Why? According to the world, I had no reason to go, because the world believes . . . Well, the world believes many things that are false, because I didn't need to change who I am and become a gloomy person in order to be a good Trappist, nor do I need to change now. But the joy of jazz is very different from the joy of a conscience in which God reigns . . .

I traded in my desires and interest in being a good architect one day for a desire to obtain a position in heaven loving God. Seeing that my body, with all its cares, was just a bit of clay not worth paying any attention to, I concentrated instead on my soul, which is immortal. And last, since I saw clearly that God loved me so much more than I loved Him in return, I decided to give myself to Him, body and soul, so that, with my corporal and spiritual sacrifices, I might save myself and save others.

That is the whole reason, plain and simple, that I went to La Trapa: love for God, not fear, as Father Faber thought. Of course, Father Faber was speaking about contemplative life generally, and even though if you think about it, his book is right, I am here to confirm that as far as I am concerned, the exception to the rule is clear enough.

Even so, it's so difficult to express the feelings I have about the world, now that I am in it after having been a Trappist . . . They are so varied and so diverse, and there are so many different things that give me reasons to meditate . . . I've been away from my monastery for a few months now . . . I see, I observe, and I keep quiet, but in my soul and spirit, which got rather sensitive on me quite some time ago, these feelings are constantly being rekindled . . . And often, without wanting to, I find myself comparing my life as a Cistercian novice to the life that surrounds me now . . . It is so different!! Different in every way: in how people work, think, and express themselves; people's interests are not the same; it seems like God is far away . . . At least it seems as though He is to me, even though that may not be the case.

It's not that God has grown distant, but rather that people are so busy with their small-minded interests that they slowly come to forget about Him. God, for them, is a *thing* of little consequence . . . what a shame.

Today I left the house just when it started to get dark . . . I walked the main streets of the city, and, a bit agitated by the hubbub of the crowds, the cars, and the lights, I went where my soul needed to go . . . to the house of God . . . It was nearly empty. One old lady was muttering prayers before a poorly lit altar, another group of women was whispering next to a confessional, and the Lord, the God of Creation, the Judge of the living and the dead, was in the Tabernacle, forgotten by humanity . . . This made me feel ashamed, for I am a man, and thus a sinner, and even though I want to atone for the Tabernacle's abandonment, I cannot . . . It is enough that God should do me the favor of admitting me into His presence . . . What can I do? . . . Woe is me, if all I do for such a good Father is show myself a bad son!

My prayer was so weak and bland that I didn't know if God would hear it . . . In any case, I didn't stop offering it on that account.

In peace, and in silence, as time went on, my soul abandoned itself in God. I saw, passing before me, all the miseries and misfortunes of humanity, every hatred and every fight, and I thought that if God, who hides Himself in a piece of bread, were not so abandoned, then people would be happier, but they don't want to be . . .

In that moment, I was sad, why not admit it? Perhaps my feelings were influenced by the grey afternoon of this humid city; perhaps it was my soul, upon seeing my sins and those of my brothers and sisters . . . I don't have the words for it, but the solitude of God's temple accentuated my sadness . . . I remembered the chanting of the psalms in La Trapa; I saw my brother monks, singing before God, and I saw myself separated from them, and alone . . . I saw how weak and limp my love for God was . . . I want to be holy, but I can't.

When I left the church, it was night. I didn't want to walk toward the city center, so I headed for the neighborhoods on the outskirts . . . There, I saw the usual: material and moral poverty . . . Occasionally, the dirty, dark houses provided a glimpse into the poorly lit rooms inside, the smell of dust and dampness, disheveled women screeching at the children playing in the ditch . . . dirty, poorly lit streets . . . as for shops, just houses where only the essentials are sold . . . bread and sandals. From time to time, a tavern, emitting the scent of tobacco, wine, and cheap food. All this under a cloudy, starless sky . . .

This is the people, the poor people, among whom hunger is an everyday reality. The residents of the city center don't want to come here, because they find poverty

bothersome. There, they have luxury stores, and houses with doormen and elevators; there are dazzling advertisements on the theaters, and their shiny, clean cars can glide over the asphalt without getting filled up with mud or running into children playing in the ditch.

And, nevertheless, the poor and the rich alike are children of God; all have the same weaknesses and the same sins . . . but someday, when God judges, what surprises we'll be in for!! The desperation of the hungry can be justified, but the selfishness of those who have money but are annoyed by the poor, that cannot be forgiven.

If the upper class forgets God, why are we surprised when the lower class rebels? . . . There's no need to go to the poor and preach patience and resignation to them. Rather, one must go to the rich and tell them that if they are unjust and do not give of what they have, then the wrath of God shall fall upon them.

As I walked through these neighborhoods, I was struck by many thoughts of indignation and shame. The further God is banished from society, the more misery there will be, and if, in a place that calls itself Christian, people hate one another on the basis of class or self-interest and separate themselves into rich and poor neighborhoods, what will happen when God's name is cursed by both one and the other? . . . If the idea of God is taken from the poor, they have nothing else left; their desperation is justifiable, their hatred for the rich is natural, their desire for revolution and anarchy is logical. And if the idea of God is a nuisance to the rich, and they do not heed the precepts of the Gospel and the teachings of Jesus . . . then they shouldn't complain. If their selfishness hinders them from drawing near to the poor, they should not be surprised when the latter plan to take what they have by force.

Looking around at today's society, what Christian soul is not pained to see it in such a state? . . . When I think on how all social conflicts and differences would be smoothed out if we turned our gaze slightly toward that God who was so abandoned in the church I just visited . . . When I think, looking at the spectacle that humanity presents, on how hatred and envy, selfishness and lies, would all disappear if we gazed at God . . . When I see such an easy solution for human beings to be happy, but they are blind or crazy and don't want to see it . . . then I cannot help but exclaim: "Lord . . . Lord, look on Your suffering people . . . Human beings are not evil, Lord . . . but if You abandon them, Lord, who can survive?<sup>461</sup> . . . What can we do all on our own? Nothing, absolutely nothing . . . If You were to turn Your gaze away from the world for just a single moment, the world would be thrown into chaos . . . Forgive us, Lord."

Ever since I left my monastery, I hear nothing but noise . . . The only music that doesn't bother me is prayer . . . But you hear very little of that in the world . . . Everything else is noise. A lot of people ask me about the silence of La Trapa, and I don't know how to answer them, because the silence of La Trapa is not silence . . . it is a sublime symphony that the world doesn't understand . . . It is a silence that says, "Don't make noise, brother, I'm talking to God . . ."

It is a silence of the body, so as to let the soul rejoice in the contemplation of God. It is not the silence of someone who has nothing to say; rather, it is the silence of someone who holds many things inside, and even very beautiful things, but keeps quiet so that words, which are always clumsy, don't spoil their conversation with God.

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<sup>461</sup> Ps 76:7.

It is a silence that makes us humble, that makes us resigned; for when we have some difficulty, silence makes it so that we tell only Jesus about it, so that He might take care of it in silence too, without anyone else realizing it . . .

Silence is necessary for prayer. With silence, it is difficult to lack charity; with silence, we show greater gratitude for a brother's love and affection than we would with words . . . In short, silence is everything in contemplative life.

As such, now that I am in the world, everything that is not silence seems like noise to me, and sometimes even useless. A Trappist only opens his mouth to sing to God . . . and here in the world it's the opposite, when you want to talk about God, everyone shuts up.

I imagine all humanity in a great valley . . . immense and full of sunlight. Every human being is in it, and they are coming and going, moving and shouting . . . God is atop a mountain, from which He reigns over the valley, which is more immense than the sea . . . The men and women who are in the valley see the summit of the mountain where God is, but they do not see Him . . .

From the immense multitude, which is all humanity, there arises a thunderous clamor that reaches the peak of the mountain where God is . . . This clamor is people's conversations, their music mixed with war cries, sighs of sorrow and shrieks of joy, the echo of drums, the whistling of factories, electric motors, shouts from plazas and circuses, millions and millions of discussions, conversations, lectures, cinemas, and theaters; all this uproar, capable of driving anyone other than God insane, reaches the mountain's peak . . . but there it stops; God does not hear it . . . He scorns all this noise; it offends Him, and He does not hear it . . . So what is He listening to? Why doesn't God

clear out the whole crowd of people with one breath, since all they do is make an intolerable commotion? . . . It seems that something is stopping God . . . He is listening contentedly to something. Is it a whisper? No . . . you can hardly hear it . . . So what is it? . . .

We start to look carefully at all the people in the valley, and we see some who aren't shouting, or arguing, or running, or striking blows with a hammer . . . What are they doing? It seems as though they aren't doing anything . . . They are on their knees in silence . . . The others look at them and are surprised; sometimes they bother them as they pass, or they make fun of them, or they avoid them entirely . . . But they remain on their knees and they remain in silence . . . So then we go and ask them, "What are you doing? Why don't you join us, in progress, in civilization?" . . . And then they say to us, "Quiet, brother, don't make noise while I'm talking to God . . ."

What would happen to the world without prayer . . . if the one thing that pleased God, the one thing that stopped Him from doing away with humanity, were to disappear? Why is the world surprised, then, that some people, full of good will, should devote themselves to kneeling on the ground and lift their hearts to God? Does the world think they are useless? The world calls them selfish and crazy and says that they're wasting their time . . . but it's not so; those who devote themselves to prayer are the only people who know how to use time well . . . Talking to other people and arguing over trivialities with them . . . that's the real waste of time . . . Someday they'll see.



The uneducated, simple little lay brother praying Hail Marys<sup>462</sup> silently in his convent is contributing more to “world peace” than all the speeches ever delivered by the members of the League of Nations since its foundation.<sup>463</sup> That sounds like an exaggeration, but it’s the absolute truth, and I am convinced of it . . . Someday, and someday soon, we shall undeniably see it. When I see good Catholic people who dismiss prayer as a secondary concern—when it is quite the opposite, it is the primary concern—I feel like saying so many things to them . . . but I keep quiet. Martha, too, kept quiet at Jesus’s feet when Mary told her she wasn’t doing anything useful<sup>464</sup> . . . But the Divine Master answered on her behalf, saying that she had *chosen the better part* . . . That is, that she was more pleasing to Him.

It’s not that I think that those who work for God’s glory in the world aren’t doing anything . . . not at all. What I mean is that if they don’t have a prayer life . . . it’s all a waste of time . . . It’s good to preach and to move about, but if they don’t kneel down from time to time and pray to God in silence, they run the risk that all their efforts will

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<sup>462</sup> Before Vatican II, lay brothers were obligated to pray a certain number of Our Fathers and Hail Marys every day in lieu of praying the Divine Office with the monks (OC 343; also see Manuscript 7).

<sup>463</sup> *The League of Nations*: An international organization dedicated to world peace active from 1920 to 1946. It was a precursor to the United Nations.

<sup>464</sup> Rafael mixes up their names; Mary was at Jesus’s feet when Martha approached them. See Luke 10:38–42.

get mixed up with the world's efforts, and thus all they are doing is making noise . . . Noise that does not reach God and, as such, a waste of time.

These things I'm writing down as they occur to me might not be deep thoughts or have any wit to them . . . far be it from me to imagine that they do. What I do want them to be is a faithful reflection of what I think . . . of my way of feeling and seeing things.

When I take up my pen, and I think for a moment beforehand about what I'm going to say, realizing that all I think about is talking about God and always about God . . . I feel so small that I feel like shutting my notebook and leaving the pages blank, for surely they'd speak more eloquently of the greatness of God, His immensity, His infinite power, and His eternal love . . . than I could using my clumsy words. But on the other hand, since I'm not writing this for other people to read, but rather writing in order to dialogue, or rather monologue . . . to open my heart, to speak to God as if He were the one to whom I am writing.

My writings are, at the same time, reflections to myself, and prayers to God. My impressions of what my eyes see in the world where I am, seen through the prism of God . . . I cannot see it in any other way, nor do I wish to . . . If a landscape impresses me, it is because I see God in it, and the colors and wind and sun are all His works . . . Let us praise Him, then.

I also see God in His creatures, that is, in human beings and in irrational beings alike, in the greatness of souls, to praise Him, and in the misery of bodies, to implore Him . . . I also see God in the activities of life, and I relate everything back to Him . . . An action has no value unto itself if it is not directed toward some end; the action will be good if its end is good, and bad if its end is bad. And it is good when its end is God, and

bad when it's the opposite. And since God is all that concerns me, when I analyze an action, an impression of my feelings, or an event that affects me, I look for God first; I analyze my ideas, hoping to come across Him there, and I direct my actions in such a way that, through them, they will take me toward Him . . . And this is so easy!! . . . Even eating, laughing, talking . . . all the actions we do in our everyday lives, all of them, we can direct toward this end . . . and thus it happens that, doing everything for God, everything is good; and in the most insignificant matters in life, we can lift our hearts to Him and entrust it all to Him.

But Lord . . . You know that, even though this is my desire, so many times I forget that You exist, and I act as if You could not see me . . . Many times, at the end of the day, I have spoken as if not in Your presence and busied myself with a thousand chores that, though not bad, have lost their value because I have not offered them to You . . .

Lord, if You are *everything*, how is it possible that I could forget You, even for a moment? . . . Oh, Lord! If it were only forgetting You, that would be one thing, but offending You? . . . Let us draw a veil over this; the past is in the past, but admit me into Your presence. I wish I had the tears of King David, who upon entering into Your presence remembered his sins, anguish seized his chest, and he wept so much that he could not find rest in his bed.<sup>465</sup>

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<sup>465</sup> “David said to Nathan, ‘I have sinned against the Lord’ . . . David therefore pleaded with God for the child; David fasted, and went in and lay all night on the ground” (2 Sam 12:13, 16).

Lord, give me a good look and You'll see—even though I do not deserve Your attention—You can see that even though I am busy with a thousand things and necessities, my spirit is in You. And if I get distracted, and creatures take me away from You for even a moment, remember that I am weak, and that my heart is human, and that I am a man full of imperfections. My desire is to see You in everything that surrounds me, to think of nothing more than Your infinite love for me, and to have You present always, when I sleep and when I wake, when I laugh and when I cry. May everything be directed toward Your ends, and may I lack everything but You, for in having You, I have everything.

There is only one thing that makes me suffer in this world . . . and that is the forgetfulness of creatures toward their Creator . . . Knowing Him and having a relationship with Him, it greatly saddens me to see people's ingratitude. I can forgive all the sins, and I try to make amends for them . . . but forgetfulness and ingratitude? How can I not feel pain, looking at children who forget their Father, who do not love Him . . . who do not know Him?

I very much understand the outbursts of those saints who shouted the name of Christ through the streets and plazas, and I don't know how they didn't go crazy when they realized that people weren't listening to them . . . I very much understand why Saint Francis preached to the fish and the birds.

What a shame, Lord, what a shame . . . and I can't do anything about it!

There is one thing that causes me alarm, and makes me suffer greatly . . . and that is my excessive sensitivity. Anything can bring me joy, but any mishap can make me cry; this demonstrates how far behind I am when it comes to virtue.

One time, a brother struck a very personal nerve with me, without meaning to, and I cried bitterly. At first, I thought my tears were because I was humiliated; later, upon reconsideration, I realized that they were also imbued with some pride. I am like a very finely tuned guitar, whose strings vibrate at the slightest twitch in the air or the slightest graze . . . I should make myself stronger; souls that have truly been entrusted to God do not cry when somebody offends them . . . Did they not scourge Christ?

What I can guarantee is that I never hold onto resentment toward anyone, nor do I seek amends for myself . . . And I am much sorrier for a brother's lack of charity toward me than I am offended on my own behalf. We should model ourselves after Jesus, who asked forgiveness for His enemies as they crucified Him<sup>466</sup> . . . Only a God does such a thing, and that God is Jesus Christ . . . Meanwhile we despicable sinners suffer when we are humiliated and cry when we are offended, and it should be entirely the other way around. We should rejoice when someone scourges or injures us, whether they mean to or not.

But such things cannot be helped, and if they can be helped somehow, it is with virtue . . . But when you don't have that, tears are very human.

But, Lord, what do I deserve? . . . I deserve to be scorned and shunned by others, You know that quite well . . . and it terrifies me to think that the world's high regard for me should give You cause to think that I have been well rewarded here on earth, and meanwhile in Your eyes, I should be presented as I really am, which the world does not

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<sup>466</sup> Luke 23:34.

know . . . As such, Lord, make the world despise me so that all my great sins might be forgotten in Your eyes . . . Do this for me, Lord, and I promise not to cry anymore.<sup>467</sup>

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<sup>467</sup> Rafael continued this manuscript on October 24, 1934 (see Manuscript 56).

**52. to W. Marino del Hierro**

Oviedo, September 29, 1934

My dear friend and brother Marino,

I received your letter, and it greatly consoled me to learn that you were receiving Communion every day. Even though you say you don't feel any devotion, don't worry, because it's God who bestows that, and God who takes it away when He pleases . . . and we aren't going to give up just because we don't have it.

As long as you keep walking down the path of perfection, you will encounter many unexpected things. At the beginning, God helps us supernaturally, He opens our eyes, He shows us the true light, and He shows us the way; sometimes He even consoles us, and spoils us like the little children that we are . . . But there comes a time when it seems as if He is hiding . . . the eyes of our souls see nothing, we experience dryness in prayer, everything wearies and bores us, perhaps we think that God is abandoning us . . . but it's not so. Jesus never lets go of our hand . . . but He does test us.

Oh, how easy virtue would be, my friend Marino, if whenever we addressed God, we felt *profound* devotion! At first, God grants us that, but as we grow stronger in the faith, God hides himself away sometimes, and as we grow in virtue, sometimes God also shows Himself to us in all His splendor. But perhaps it takes years to get there, or even a lifetime . . .

We see this frequently in reading the lives of the saints. Saint Teresa herself tells us that she went many years without knowing what devotion is.<sup>468</sup>

But we should not be discouraged on that account. This happens to me often, but I don't ask God for anything . . . I don't even deserve to feel devotion . . . it's enough just that He admits me into His presence . . . Besides, I think it was Saint Bernard (I don't remember exactly) who said, "Brothers, don't ask for consolation or revelations in prayer, for on the Mount of Olives, Jesus did not ask for these, but rather sweated blood."<sup>469</sup>

Take courage, then, my friend Marino. If it is meritorious to act rightly toward God when we feel devotion and enthusiasm for spiritual things, it is much more so when, in desolation and indifference, we nevertheless act as if we truly saw God tangibly in everything that surrounds us.

Regarding reading and meditation, I'll just say that it's a question of habit . . . It often strikes us as overly sentimental, we find it fruitless, it bores and wearies us . . . so

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<sup>468</sup> "These labors [perseverance in prayer] take their toll. Being myself one who endured them for many years . . . I know they are extraordinary. . . . Conceal from your eyes the thought about why He gives devotion to one after such a few days and not to me after so many years. Let us believe that all is for our own greater good" (Saint Teresa of Ávila, *The Book of Her Life* 11.11–12, in *Collected Works*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodríguez [Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1976], 1:82–83).

<sup>469</sup> While the source for this quotation is unclear, it refers to Jesus' agony in the garden (see Luke 22:39–46).



we redouble our efforts, ask the Virgin Mary for perseverance and light, and thus little by little we start getting used to it, and then later we even come to find that we miss it when we don't do it.

It's very useful before going to sleep and when getting up . . . I recommend reading half a chapter before you go to sleep, or a whole one, or a few verses; whatever you think . . . it's always better to read only a little, in order not to overburden the imagination, which is not beneficial . . . And afterwards we simply fall asleep thinking about what we have read, and in the morning, we read it again in order to have it present throughout the day . . . to reflect on it, draw conclusions, set goals, or simply remember it fondly . . . As you can see, it's rather easy, especially for someone who doesn't have much time and is busy with a thousand things.

But if you knew how little effort is needed to think of God and the Virgin while you walk, while you bathe, while you get dressed, while you eat, and even while you're talking . . . you need only resolve to do it.

Regarding reading, do what I tell you and you'll see how well it'll go . . . Take it upon yourself as penance; don't other people discipline themselves? . . . So five minutes before going to sleep and five minutes before getting up, who doesn't have time for that?

Anyway, I'm giving you advice that I suppose you don't need, because you know all this already. Forgive my candor, it's all in good faith. If you knew, my friend Marino, how much I care about you continuing onward and not letting anything or anyone discourage you . . .

Knowing that you listen to me charitably, that you enjoy my letters and that they motivate you to love God . . . in all these things, you have more than repaid me. It's so

difficult to come to love when there's no self-interest or favors involved, or without even knowing each other . . . and between you and me, there's none of that, there's only God . . . that God who fills all things, who makes people love each other with a pure and disinterested love, who draws close to us and unites us, so that we suffer if our brother suffers, and we rejoice when he rejoices . . . The world is so far from what it really is to love God, and to love one's neighbor. Is it not so, brother?

And so, when I see that you reciprocate what I am giving you and what I am offering you, which is an open heart and my sincere friendship, I cannot help but praise God with all my strength and all my soul. Don't perceive any modesty in me, for there isn't any, and don't thank me for anything either . . . I do what I ought and what I can. If I could communicate to you all my confidence in God, I would do just that.

That is what one must have: confidence, so much confidence in Jesus, who can do all things, and who does not abandon us . . . What we must do is abandon ourselves in Him, with our bodies and souls, with all our weakness and misery and little virtue. If we do this, we have nothing to fear.

Don't be in a rush to draw close to God, because even though you imagine that He is far away, perhaps that's not true. On the other hand, we despicable sinners are not the ones who draw close to God, but rather Jesus is the one who draws close to us, though we don't deserve it . . .

Let's have confidence and faith, and not be afraid of our sins, which we have only to weep over; they don't stop Jesus from loving us . . . that Jesus of Nazareth who ate with tax collectors and sinners, giving great scandal to the Pharisees . . . For us sinners He came down into the world and died on the Cross, and the angels in heaven rejoice

more over one lost sheep who returns to the flock than all those who are already in the fold.<sup>470</sup>

Be completely assured that, on the day you decided to follow Jesus on the way to Calvary, the Blessed Virgin and all the saints of heaven celebrated with rejoicing and sang the *Gloria* in honor of the Creator. And have you ever thought about turning back? . . . Please, Marino, my friend, don't make Mary sad, and don't think about any such thing.

That you'll come across hurdles and obstacles on your path is evident, who doesn't? . . . But commend yourself to Her, and jump over them bravely . . . This life is very short, and when you least expect it, you shall have your reward . . . you'll find yourself *face to face* with the God who is hidden from you now, and there will be no more tears or desolation . . . Use this time well, then; life, as I'm telling you, is a mere breath, and eternity . . . is very long.

Is it possible that Br. Tescelino is going to write me? I was so happy the other day when you told me in your letter that he would. If only you knew, I need the encouragement of my brothers so much too . . . and sometimes I feel so alone!

I await Br. Tescelino's letter with joyful eagerness. I won't say that he's very good, because perhaps he'll read this letter and that would offend his modesty . . . but you know better than I do that he is, for God's will has been such that I hardly know him.

I don't have anything else in particular to tell you. I sent him a card at his house—Calle del General Salinas 20, no. 3 (if I remember correctly), but it doesn't matter; I just sent him a few lines asking for his address in Burgos.

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<sup>470</sup> See Luke 15:1–10.

One last thing . . . in your letter, at the end, you asked me for forgiveness a thousand times over . . . Forgiveness? A thousand times over? . . . For what? In any case I . . . for God's sake, don't be ridiculous. And now I'm the one asking for your forgiveness a thousand times over.

I'd also greatly desire to spend some time talking with you . . . but let's wait, everything will take its course.

Without further ado, give Br. Tescelino a big hug for me. Your brother in Jesus and Mary, who truly loves you,

*Rafael*

P.S. If you have time, don't stop writing back, because I always look forward to your letters happily. Even if you think it's the other way round, they also encourage me to serve and love God . . . Don't you remember the story about Captain Araña, who "boarded everybody else and then got left behind on the shore"?<sup>471</sup> I imagine I don't have to explain any further.

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<sup>471</sup> *Captain Araña*: In Spanish, this saying is invoked when someone is left behind at the last second, especially on a project of their own undertaking.

**53. to Fernanda Torres**

Oviedo, September 30, 1934

My dearest *abuelita*,

Perhaps you'll be surprised to receive this letter, and upon seeing the signature of your grandson Rafael, you think . . . "but Lord, I haven't the faintest idea who this grandson might be . . ." But if you dig into your memory a bit, perhaps you'll realize and exclaim . . . "Could it be?! . . . For my grandson to write me is a strange, unexpected event . . ." But, nevertheless, it's true.

I already know what you're thinking . . . that I'm ungrateful, a bad person, that I don't love you, that you're just an old woman who is useless to me, that I don't see you as important, that the distance between us has made me forget about you . . . You know, all those delightful things that you say in your letters.

Well, *abuelita* . . . that's all wrong, and none of it is true. I won't try to make excuses for not having written you earlier . . . because honestly I have no excuse, but in any case I am absolutely sure that you aren't holding a grudge against me, and that you forgive my offense . . . We all have many faults, and this is one of mine . . . not writing to my dear grandmother, who loves me more than I deserve.

But look . . . when I offend God, which unfortunately is often . . . later I feel great shame, and since I have no excuse for having offended Him . . . I calmly tell him, "Lord, here I am . . . do you forgive me?" And Jesus, who is so good, forgives me; and while my sins are ever before me, that I might weep over them and see my weakness in them, I am sure that God forgets them . . . So, *abuela*, do the same thing. Forget my tardiness in

writing you, and this will make you a better person, a better Christian . . . and a better grandmother, don't you think? At the end of the day, what do you expect from a grandson like me?

Merceditas continues to recover, thank God, albeit slowly. She is eating well and is staying in bed, and the doctors say that things are wrapping up to their satisfaction . . . Now she's starting what they call "ultraviolet light baths."<sup>472</sup> Though the nights are really hard on her, poor thing—on her and her mother—she is content. On her name day,<sup>473</sup> she received the Lord, and He is the one who must cure her.

As for me, I'm also doing much better. I don't take insulin anymore, I've fattened up, and now I can see myself going back to my monastery in just a few months.

One of these days I'll write to my good Father Master<sup>474</sup> to ask his permission to go and make a retreat with the community for eight days . . . I am already rejoicing just at the thought that, even if only for a few days, I'll be able to put on my Trappist habit . . . I'm telling you, it's the only way I'm comfortable.

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<sup>472</sup> *Ultraviolet light baths*: While his sister Merceditas's condition is unclear from Rafael's description, at the time, phototherapy (the medical use of ultraviolet irradiation) was a cutting-edge treatment for tuberculosis, among other diseases. See Rik Roelandts, "The History of Phototherapy: Something New under the Sun?" *Journal of the American Academy of Dermatology* 46, no. 6 (June 2002): 926–30.

<sup>473</sup> *Name day*: September 24, the feast of Our Lady of Mercy ("Nuestra Señora de las Mercedes").

<sup>474</sup> *Father Master*: Father Marcelo León (see Letter 17).

If you knew how much they love me there, and how much I love those humble little monks . . . They are so good! I know that they'll be very happy to see me in choir again, singing to God . . . That is the only happiness here on earth: to join spiritually with the angels in heaven, intoning the *Gloria* in the Creator's honor. Don't you be surprised, then, that I should have such a strong desire to continue being a Trappist . . . Who cares about the body and its discomforts and austerity when the soul is in God?

I assure you, I notice none of that—not the cold, or my exhaustion, or anything else—when I'm in choir . . . And how true it is what our Father Saint Bernard said regarding Cistercian monks: he saw the angels in choir, helping the monks sing the psalmody.<sup>475</sup>

And look, *abuelita*, when I was there, with the Tabernacle so close by and the Virgin looking at me, I thought of you often.

What does it matter if I didn't write you? Is writing necessary in order for me to love you? . . . Of course it's a very human consolation to receive even a few lines from loved ones. But looking at it from a more noble perspective, you'll see what writing is not *necessary*, just as it isn't necessary to shout prayers to love God and know that we are loved by Him . . . don't think that your grandson has forgotten you because he fails to send you a couple of poorly arranged sentences that cannot express my affection accurately.

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<sup>475</sup> See Conrad of Eberbach, *The Great Beginning of Cîteaux*, trans. Benedicta Ward and Paul Savage, ed. E. Rozanne Elder, CF 72 (Collegeville, MN: Cistercian Publications, 2012), 132–33.

In La Trapa, we have silence. If only you knew how much that silence, which the world assumes is so gloomy, helps us to understand one another . . . Words are always clumsy, while silence can be rather expressive . . . There, we love one another deeply and truly; our love for God unites us in spirit, while our bodies are united by the Rule, by penance, and sometimes by suffering . . . As for the heart, ours is also very united . . . in silence we tell it . . . “If you knew how beautiful it is to be a Trappist!!!”

There are so many things I’d tell you if only I knew how to write . . . but there’s no need. You, too, understand me even when I don’t say anything. I suffered so much the day I had to leave, but when I go back, the monastery won’t be big enough to contain all my joy . . . and I know *without a doubt* that I am to die in La Trapa.

My vocation is ever stronger, you could almost say it has grown . . . and as God is giving it to me, He will also give me the means to fulfill it, have no doubt. Right now I am not healthy enough to follow the diet: well that’s easy enough, He’ll give me health. I might be a wretched sinner, but would I ever fail to have confidence in God? . . . Never.

It was necessary for me to leave the monastery . . . I was too happy . . . God threatened me with death (if it’s possible that God can threaten) in order to obligate me to go out once more into the world . . . This trial is very hard; I’ve been away for four months, and I am still a Trappist . . . He took me away, so He will lead me back . . . He knows what He is doing; we, with our weak reason and human way of thinking, cannot fathom God’s mysteries toward His creatures . . . Let’s let Him do things, and have confidence in Him. Right, *abuelita*?

The other day I received a letter from Father Master . . . so caring and good with me as he always is . . . For him I am still his novice, Brother María Rafael . . . The will of



God is in the will of my superiors, so if for my superiors, the Abbot and Father Master, I am still Brother María Rafael, then that is who I shall also be to the world . . . even if the world is against it. To me, the voice of my Father Abbot is the voice of God, and if he awaits me, then God awaits me too.

I was so grateful, to the depths of my novice's soul, for the letter you wrote me at La Trapa following my entrance, and were I not a son of obedience, I would have written you back. If I write you back now it's not because you asked or pressured me to, but just for its own sake. I never do things out of obligation. While I was there, I only ever answered letters from my mother, and only on my Father Master's orders—that is, not on his orders, but with his permission, which is different.

I haven't heard a word from Uncle Polín<sup>476</sup> . . . but he knows there's no need. Anyway, I'll write him one of these days.

I know Aunt Rosa<sup>477</sup> received my letter. Poor thing, I love her very much, even though she doesn't realize it.

I don't have anything else to tell you, and as you can see, I've said rather little, and you knew it all already.

There's nothing I can say about the world that would interest you and that I would know about. Your poor grandson only cares about God and the Virgin Mary . . . that's what I know. At times, I get very annoying, I know, and you'll be able to forgive me. But look, I think what I'm saying to you about thinking about God and relating everything

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<sup>476</sup> *Uncle Polín*: Rafael's maternal uncle, Leopoldo Barón.

<sup>477</sup> *Aunt Rosa*: Rosa Calvo, a family friend.

back to Him isn't exclusive to Trappists . . . It's common to all Christians, don't you think? . . .

We think that devotion, penance, and talking about spiritual things is the domain of vowed religious, but that's not true . . . This life is so short, as you well know, being near the end of it. When we present ourselves before God, He will make demands of us all—according to what He has given us, of course. And then we will see how much time we have foolishly wasted on trivial things and worldly interests.

Before I went to La Trapa, when I thought about the monks of Venta de Baños, I used to say . . . “Well, those men martyr their bodies, devote themselves to prayer, and think of nothing but God . . . What an admirable life . . . But,” I thought, “they're Trappists, it's natural that they should conduct themselves this way . . . I'm not a Trappist . . . But,” I thought, “we'll be judged by the same God, the duration of their lives is like mine in that it will be over soon, and then what? . . . Am I not a child of God too? . . . And yet, they love Him and I do not . . . There's no reason for things to be this way . . . I have to put these few days here on earth to good use . . . I have to love God much, and I have to weep for my sins and those of my brothers and sisters in humanity who do not love Him . . .” And I kept thinking, and thinking . . . and one fine day, I went to La Trapa.

Now that I am in the world, I see that everybody else thinks the way I used to before, and when they see me in the church often, they say, “Well, that's only natural, of course, he's a Trappist . . .” I don't go to the cinema or the theater, and they say the same thing: “Of course, since he's a Trappist he can't, he shouldn't go, that's only logical . . . That's no place for a monk . . .” What's more, since I've started smoking again, some people have been scandalized, and at the very least they're thinking I've lost my vocation

. . . That's how the world is. But watching it happen, I just think . . . “Well, don't we have the same God, me and you and that guy over there? . . . Didn't Jesus die for all of us? . . . Isn't He in the Tabernacle waiting for all of us? . . . So why do so few of us go and keep Him company? . . .” I sincerely believe, *abuela*, that the world has lost its mind . . . and is on its way to losing its heart, which would be even worse.

What does it matter if we are Trappists, or soldiers, or poor or rich, or tall or short, or men or women? We should all have the same love for God. It won't be enough to say, one day, in front of Jesus, “Lord, I loved you, but since I had to go to the barracks every day, well, of course a soldier shouldn't be distracted with something else . . .” And the farmer, busy with his oxen, doesn't have time either, and the intellectual doesn't care about “monkish nonsense,” and so on and so forth, everybody makes excuses.<sup>478</sup>

That's it, without a doubt: either the Trappists are completely insane, or everybody else has a suicide pact . . . It scares me, and makes me feel pity for them, believe me. Either we are Christians or we aren't; one either loves God or doesn't; as Jesus says, *whoever is not with me is against me*.<sup>479</sup> And elsewhere He adds that He will spit those who are lukewarm out of His mouth.<sup>480</sup> So, as you can see, this isn't just hot air. The words of Sacred Scripture are clear and decisive.

So, *abuelita*, don't be surprised that I don't care about anything but God and His glory . . . What I really want is for everyone, all humanity and all people without

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<sup>478</sup> See Luke 14:1524.

<sup>479</sup> Matt 12:30.

<sup>480</sup> See Rev 3:16.

exception, to turn their gaze upward a bit and contemplate God who is looking down at us . . . and who will judge us . . . Let's not waste time, for there is so little left . . . this is just as true for you as it is for me. I've been an inch from death and I wasn't afraid . . . I was joyful, even. God did not will it, so may it be when He wills; sooner or later, it's all the same to me . . . And meanwhile, let us love life, for God gives it to us, so we must love it, even with its sufferings and sorrows. Let us praise Him without ceasing and at all times.

True, you are getting on in years, but what does that matter? You see the sun and sky and flowers, which are all God's creatures and proclaim His glory. You have a Tabernacle nearby where you can talk to Jesus, so that He can console you in everything. You have a grandson who loves you very much (even if you don't believe it), who prayed and will pray for you in a choir of Cistercian monks . . . In a word, you have God and the Virgin's protection. What more could you ask for? Don't tell me you need something, because you have it *all*.

Well, pardon my sermon, *abuelita*, but "well, seeing as I'm a Trappist . . ."

Give a big hug to Aunt María<sup>481</sup> for me. With all my love, the oldest and littlest of your grandchildren,

*Rafael*

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<sup>481</sup> *Aunt María*: Rafael's maternal aunt, María Josefa Barón Torres, who lived with Fernanda.

**54. to Fr. Marcelo León**

Oviedo, October 2, 1934

My dear Father Master,

I received your lovely letter, which moved me greatly as always . . . I can't help it. Anytime you all say a kind word or do me a courtesy that I don't deserve, it produces a great joy in me. I take such joy in hearing you call me "Brother María Rafael" and "dear novice" that only God in heaven can know how much I appreciated your lovely letter.

I am still much better, and I'm very strong now. According to the doctor, I've been making a surprising recovery from this illness, although I'm going slowly and not rushing because that could lead to setbacks. That's all the news I can give you regarding my body.

Regarding my soul, what can I say that you don't already know or can't imagine on your own? . . . I've been away from my beloved Trapa for four months now, and I can assure you that I think of nothing but the choir, my habit, my little space in the dormitory, my brothers, the chocolate factory . . . all of it . . . all those things that drew me so close to God and made me so happy.

Finding myself separated from you and from the Tabernacle of La Trapa, I have been made to live in the world as a prisoner, out of place . . . I don't think I'd ever get used to it, and if it weren't for the absolute confidence I have that God is to bring me back to the monastery, and the knowledge that I am doing His will, I'd find my life impossible . . . But I believe that nothing is impossible when you truly love God, and we know that the Blessed Virgin guides us.

Now, dear Father, I am going to ask one thing of you and Reverend Father Abbot, and it is simply to come visit you for a few days. On October 23, the community's retreat begins . . . and I . . . I know I have no right, because I do not belong to the community, but even if only for eight days, I could stay in the infirmary, and I'd bring my habit with me, which I never leave behind.

Tell me, Father, if that would be appropriate, or if you think the community does not approve of my demand, or any other reason you observe; tell me, and in everything I will obey those who are still my superiors. But if you could see how much I need this . . . Those days of rest would be of great benefit to my soul, which, while it has grown accustomed to suffering, is still not yet what it ought to be . . . And if you were to look me in the eyes right now, surely you'd grant me permission.

With true eagerness, I await your letter, in which you will tell me what you have decided.

You can imagine what those days would mean to me . . . I am so out of it that, despite having been in the world for quite a while now, it seems as though it was just yesterday that I took off that novice's cape under which I was so at ease.

I don't wish to trouble you any further, for I have no right to that either. I simply look to your charity, and thus I beg you to treat me with charity; as you can see, what I'm asking for is rather small, yet for me it would be great.

If you receive this letter tomorrow, October 3, don't forget to pray to Saint Thérèse for me<sup>482</sup> . . . She too suffered greatly before finding herself in Carmel definitively, but she prayed to God so much that she saw her desires fulfilled.

Greet Father Francisco<sup>483</sup> and the novices for me; may they not forget their brother, whose body may be far away, but whose heart and soul are still there, in the choir and at the foot of the Tabernacle and of the Virgin.

Give my respectful regards to Father Abbot, and all my affection to you, my dear Father Master, in Jesus and Mary. Asking your blessing, your novice,

*Brother María Rafael*<sup>484</sup>

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<sup>482</sup> Until 1969, Saint Thérèse was celebrated on October 3. Her feast day is now October 1.

<sup>483</sup> Fr. Francisco Díez Martínez was the sub-master, or assistant master of novices.

<sup>484</sup> While Fr. Marcelo's response has not been preserved, Rafael did not make a visit to the monastery because of the outbreak of the Revolution of 1934 in Asturias on October 5 (see Letter 55).

### 55. to Rafael Arnáiz Sánchez de la Campa

Burgos, October 24, 1934<sup>485</sup>

Feast of Saint Raphael<sup>486</sup>

*Missus est Angelus Domini, sanctus Raphaël a Deo ad Tobiam, et salutavit eum, et dixit: Gaudium sit tibi semper.*<sup>487</sup>

That is precisely what I wish for you, dear father. Though this letter may arrive late, I don't think you'll mind once you learn that today, at communion, your son asked God to give his father the same thing that the angel Raphael wished for Tobit when he greeted him and said, "May joy be with you always."

I have nothing more to say to you, except that I'm doing well now that I'm not hearing gunshots or seeing ruins, and now that I've discussed the events that occurred in Oviedo so many times, I don't know what I'm talking about anymore.

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<sup>485</sup> On October 5, 1934, a revolutionary uprising led by miners' unions began in Asturias. After the violence ceased in Oviedo, where Rafael was staying with his parents, he went to stay at the Burgos residence of his aunt and uncle, Pepita Conde Merino and Álvaro Barón Torres (OC 363).

<sup>486</sup> Until 1969, the feast of Saint Raphael was observed on October 24. He is now commemorated alongside Saints Michael and Gabriel on September 29.

<sup>487</sup> "Saint Raphael, the Angel of the Lord, was sent by God to Tobit, who greeted him; and the angel answered, 'May joy be with you always.'" From the liturgy for the feast of Saint Raphael, taken from Tobit 3:17 and 5:10 (OC 363).



Tomorrow I'm going to eat at Aunt Malén's house;<sup>488</sup> it's delightfully sunny out; I don't have any sugar in the blood; and that's all.

How is Merceditas doing? . . . Has Laredo seen her yet?<sup>489</sup> Tell me all the news, but don't give me the gruesome details.

I suppose Fernando is in Madrid already.<sup>490</sup>

I ran into my Br. Tescelino here, the Trappist, who is doing his service at the hospital. As you can imagine, I have a great time with him.<sup>491</sup>

The military hospital is full of injured people from all over, and there are a few from Asturias.

With nothing else to tell you, hugs to all of you from your son,

*Rafael*

*U.H.P.*<sup>492</sup>

*R.I.P.*

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<sup>488</sup> *Aunt Malén*: Magdalena Bohigas, Rafael's paternal great-aunt.

<sup>489</sup> *Merceditas*: Mercedes Arnáiz Barón, Rafael's younger sister. *Laredo*: The Arnáiz-Barón family doctor.

<sup>490</sup> *Fernando*: Luis Fernando Arnáiz Barón, Rafael's younger brother.

<sup>491</sup> Br. Tescelino Arribas Jimeno left the monastery on November 6, 1933, to complete his compulsory military service as a medic. He returned on November 28, 1934 (OC 364).

<sup>492</sup> *U.H.P.*: The initialism for the Unión de Hermanos Proletarios (lit. "United Proletarian Brethren"), the name adopted by the revolutionary alliance in Asturias.

## 56. Literary Notes<sup>493</sup>

Burgos, October 24, 1934

Now that a few days have gone by since the terrifying catastrophe in Oviedo,<sup>494</sup> and with a more peaceful spirit and calmer nerves, I shall attempt to continue my interrupted writings.

I won't attempt a summary of the events of those nine days of anarchocommunism that we residents of Oviedo suffered through . . . It was so terrifying that I remember nothing but the apartment building, where it seemed as though we were all going crazy; the unrelenting thunder of machine guns, rifles, and dynamite; enormous fires that lit up the sky with an intense glow the color of blood; and revolutionaries constantly threatening us with their rifles and pistols.

In those days, I saw the hatred of men unleashed. Across Spain, and chiefly in Asturias, under the pretext of renewing society, lifting up workers, and suppressing capitalism, they have committed the most horrifying atrocities.

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<sup>493</sup> This manuscript, the continuation of *The Trappist's Apologia* (Manuscript 51), was untitled. *Literary Notes* is the title added by Rafael's confessor and biographer, Fr. Teófilo Sandoval Fernández.

<sup>494</sup> *The terrifying catastrophe in Oviedo*: That is, the Revolution of 1934 (see Letter 55). During this violence, the Dominican chapel where Rafael attended daily Adoration was burned, and six seminarians were killed (OC 366). They were beatified in 2019 as Blessed Ángel Cuartas Cristóbal and companions.

Those days horrified my spirit. I never thought that human beings could kill one another and destroy with such rage.

## 57. to Mercedes Barón Torres

Burgos, November 12, 1934

My dearest mother,

I have just received your letter, and while I've been thinking of writing you for a few days now, I'll get to it without further ado.

I'm doing very well, thanks be to God, and I'm very happy . . . I heard from Jesús Martínez, who was in Oviedo, that Merceditas continues to get better.<sup>495</sup> Uncle Polín isn't coming to Burgos, but rather going to Toro with Uncle Álvaro to settle his affairs there.<sup>496</sup> The other day he signed the bill of sale for Pedrosillo,<sup>497</sup> so now that he has that money, he is going to Toro immediately to settle all his debts there. I'll take advantage of the trip, naturally, to give my grandmother a hug . . . The other day she wrote me, saying that if I didn't come, she'd come see me no matter where I am . . . Poor thing . . . Even though I don't like Toro at all, as you know, she certainly deserves what little happiness I can give her.

We are leaving today, which is Monday . . . Uncle Álvaro and I will meet Uncle Polín in Valladolid, continue on to Toro, and, God willing, on Saturday I'll be back in Burgos. Then, I'll be able to tell you when I'm leaving for Oviedo, because it seems to

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<sup>495</sup> *Merceditas*: Mercedes Arnáiz Barón, Rafael's younger sister.

<sup>496</sup> *Uncle Polín* and *Uncle Álvaro*: Leopoldo and Álvaro Barón Torres, Rafael's maternal uncles.

<sup>497</sup> *Pedrosillo*: Leopoldo Barón and María Osorio's estate near Ávila.

me that as far as rest goes . . . I've already had nearly a month of it, and that's enough, don't you think?

I don't think I'll need you to send me any money for the trip, because Uncle Álvaro told me that Papá still has to charge the tenant at La Cartuja,<sup>498</sup> and when I get back from Toro I'll charge him, so you see, I'll come home fattened up and with more money . . . Stupendous. He should have a tenant in every province in Spain.

I don't have anything else to tell you. As for my life here, you can imagine . . . Absolute tranquility in every way, and delighted by how caring my aunt and uncle are toward me, which I don't deserve.

Of course, I have no idea what happened to the money Papá gave me quite a few days ago now . . . nothing to be done about that . . . It rolls away, that's why it's round . . . Clearly, I can't be helped. Now I'm undertaking this trip to Toro on sweet credit . . . Anyway, blessed be the tenant at La Cartuja.

Well, my dearest mother, give Merceditas a big hug for me, and tell her that I'm going to bring her a huge present . . . thanks to the tenant at La Cartuja . . . yes, again with the tenant.

That's all for today. May the Blessed Virgin guide us all. All my love, your son, who is always thinking of you,

*Rafael*

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<sup>498</sup> *La Cartuja*: La Cartuja de Miraflores (lit. the "Miraflores Chapterhouse") is a Carthusian monastery in Burgos. Rafael's younger brother, Luis Fernando, entered the community there in 1945.

Uncle Álvaro and Aunt Pepita send you lots of hugs.<sup>499</sup>

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<sup>499</sup> *Uncle Álvaro and Aunt Pepita*: Rafael's maternal uncle, Álvaro Barón Torres, and Pepita Conde Merino, his wife. Rafael was staying with them in Burgos at the time.

**58. to Leopoldo Arnáiz Barón**

Toro, November 14, 1934<sup>500</sup>

Dear Leopoldo,

Just a quick note to say that tomorrow I'll offer my communion for you, since it's your name day.<sup>501</sup> Tell Papá that I'll be in Burgos on Saturday,<sup>502</sup> and from there I'll tell you when I'll be arriving in Oviedo.

Fernando told me in a letter that his examinations are on Monday; is Papá going to Madrid? How is Merceditas doing?<sup>503</sup>

I'm doing well, everyone is doing well. Without further ado, a big hug from your brother,

*Rafael*

The whole family sends you kisses.

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<sup>500</sup> Rafael wrote this postcard to his brother Leopoldo from Toro, where his grandmother Fernanda Torres and aunt María Josefa Barón Torres lived.

<sup>501</sup> *Name day*: The feast of Saint Leopold is celebrated on November 15.

<sup>502</sup> *Saturday*: That is, November 17.

<sup>503</sup> Fernando and Merceditas are Rafael's other siblings. Fernando was undertaking competitive examinations in Madrid in order to qualify to work at the Bank of Spain (see Letter 54).

**59. To Rafael Arnáiz Sánchez de la Campa and Mercedes Barón Torres**

Burgos, November 19, 1934

My dearest parents,

Today, which is Monday, I'm already back from Toro; I got here on Saturday, just as Uncle Álvaro had expected.

Mariano Sáiz, the tenant at La Cartuja,<sup>504</sup> was given notice, and we expect him to come by and pay the rent today, which is 500 *pesetas*. From that, I'll pay Uncle Álvaro what I owe, which is around 160, and then I'll bring the rest with me to Oviedo. I found my grandmother and Aunt María well in Toro. Uncle Polín's affairs are not yet entirely settled . . . Anyway, I'll explain it all in person.

I'm doing very well; I've been following my diet, although even with sugar substitutes and following Laredo's advice, on the days I had a little more, Uncle Álvaro gave me ten units of insulin . . . Nothing to be done about that . . . these things happen when you're sick; but since I'm always on top of these matters, I don't want to have any setbacks.

I'll go directly to Santander, as you said, and if I can stop at La Trapa for a day, I will; Fr. Marcelo wrote me to ask what we'd been through at home,<sup>505</sup> and I'd like to say hello to him and explain to him in person how my illness is going. In Santander, I'll go to

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<sup>504</sup> See Letter 57.

<sup>505</sup> *Fr. Marcelo*: Fr. Marcelo León, master of novices. Rafael alludes here to the events of the Revolution of 1934 in Oviedo (see Letter 55).



the Hotel México, where I'll wait for you to come looking for me, as you said in your letter.

I expect to leave here on Wednesday, so that if I stop in Venta de Baños, I'll be in Santander on Thursday night; so on Friday you could drive over in the morning (on Friday) to come find me. Does that sound good to you?<sup>506</sup> If I'm not there that day because of some delay or other, I'll just telegraph you when I get to the hotel; so don't do anything until you receive a telegram from me in Santander, although as I said I'll try to be there Thursday night.

I don't have anything else to report.

I got a letter from Fernando that he'll be taking his examinations on Monday, or rather, he'll start his examinations, because it seems like they go on for a long time.<sup>507</sup>

I've tried to telephone you a few times, but they said your telephone isn't working. My aunt and uncle are doing well; Aunt Pepita has a sore that is bothering her quite a bit.

All my love, your Trappist; and may the Lord and the Blessed Virgin guide us all,

*Rafael*

If for any reason you cannot go to Santander or you don't agree with my plan, let me know by telephone before I head out.

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<sup>506</sup> The dates of Rafael's trip were Wednesday, November 21, through Friday, November 23 (OC 372).

<sup>507</sup> *Fernando*: Rafael's younger brother, Luis Fernando Arnáiz Barón. The examinations were in order to qualify to work at the Bank of Spain (see Letter 32).

**60. Dedication of a holy card  
to Fr. Buenaventura Ramos Caballero<sup>508</sup>**

La Trapa, November 21, 1934

Father Buenaventura,

I can offer you nothing, because I have nothing; you, on the other hand, who are close to the Tabernacle, please remember this brother of yours who is still out there fighting against the world. While I know that Mary has not abandoned me, I still very much need the prayers of my brother Trappists, at whose side I find myself always, if not corporally then at least spiritually.

Asking your blessing, your brother in Jesus and Mary,

*Brother María Rafael, OCSO<sup>509</sup>*

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<sup>508</sup> *Fr. Buenaventura Ramos Caballero*: The porter at San Isidro (see Letter 42). The card is undated but was probably written during Rafael's visit to La Trapa on November 21, 1934 (OC 374).

<sup>509</sup> OCSO: Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance, or Trappists.

**61. to Fr. Marcelo León**

Oviedo, February 21, 1935

My dear Father Master,

Honestly, I don't know how to start this letter . . . I want to apologize for my silence, though God knows very well that I have no excuse as far as you are concerned.

What I can promise you is that I have taken up my pen many times, and I've put it down just as many. Why? . . . I don't know. Perhaps you've thought me lazy or negligent, and that I've forgotten about my dear brother novices and my beloved Trapa, as you put it in your letter. Not at all, Father Master, quite the contrary. While it pains me that you should think so, that is how it looked. Though I've owed my brothers a letter, my moral state and mood has been such that, as I'm telling you, I haven't been able to write, and I've preferred to just cry a bit without anybody finding out. But now I don't want to let more time go by without writing you and giving you an update about my life.

First of all, I should tell you that I've had a fairly serious nervous breakdown. And why is that? I don't know, Father, because of everything and nothing at all . . . I spent Christmastime at home with my parents and brothers and sister again, and it brought back so many memories for me, and I'd be lying if I said I haven't been suffering; blessed be God who wills it thus. I find myself so far from my monastery, which I long for more ardently with each passing day. For me, that is my life, and I see that time is passing, but I don't see what God wants from me . . . Sometimes I think that, truly, I don't deserve to be a son of the Cistercian Order; that I've been dreaming too loftily for such a lowly person; that God has chastened and punished me . . . Perhaps I

committed the sin of pride, and I assure you, Father, I'm certainly being purified of it . . . Perhaps less than I deserve.

When I think on my Trapa, and find myself in the world, it makes me want to cry, and being separated from my brother novices saddens me beyond consolation. Perhaps you understand why I haven't written them; since I know they love me, why should I disturb their peace with my wailing and whining? . . . I'm not happy because I don't deserve to be happy . . . But it's not that I should like to be happy here on earth, no; it's not that. What I want is to be better than what I am . . . When I went to La Trapa, I wanted to be holy . . . you know perfectly well that such was my aspiration. That's why, Father, as I've said, it seems to me that I committed the sin of pride, and God humbled me; may He be blessed.

Now I see that I am wretched and weak, so miserly with His love; sometimes sad, sometimes dejected. I am not at all obedient to His divine will, and holiness consists of that, and I am so far from it.

I thought I'd begun to be good, but I haven't at all. I am where I was before, and perhaps even more despicable now. I don't deserve your affection, let alone that you should be thinking of me . . .

But what nonsense I'm spouting, when it's precisely the thought that there are souls in La Trapa who are praying to the Most Blessed Virgin for me that sustains me in my trials. Sometimes I think I'm alone, totally abandoned, left out in the hurricane that is the world, and thinking of you all gives me the courage and strength to keep fighting.

I so enjoyed my visit from Rev. Fr. Abbot and Fr. Buenaventura!<sup>510</sup> I was so grateful to them! . . . Every reminder that comes from the monastery is a balm to me.

The greatest work of charity that the novices did was to write me; they don't know how much that means to me, and if I wanted to explain it to them somehow, I wouldn't know how.

Forgive me, Father, but please see to my situation and, in your charity, pray to our Mother for one of Her sons, a brother of yours in religion who is suffering. Pray not that he cease to suffer, but rather that his tears be beneficial to him and that they be helpful to him in some way; for I believe that suffering is useless if one forgets Christ's Calvary and the Sorrows of His Most Holy Mother, don't you?

As for my illness, I'll say that I am getting better, albeit very slowly. For the time being, I can't yet say when my return will be, but according to the doctor, my recovery is a sure thing because I don't have any injuries whatsoever. What I won't be able to do is consume excessive starch. They measure out the food I need to eat every day now, and I follow a very strict diet.

I've only seen the aspirant<sup>511</sup> you mentioned once, when he came to see me. Seeing him so happy about his entrance into the Order stirred up something within me

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<sup>510</sup> Dom Félix Alonso García, abbot (see Letter 5), and Fr. Buenaventura Ramos Caballero, porter (see Letter 42), respectively.

<sup>511</sup> *Aspirant*: Someone seeking admission to religious life is called an "aspirant" until he formally enters.

called envy. He said he'd come again, and the other day he came by the house, but I wasn't there.

As for José Fernández Sierra, I don't know him, because the one I talked with a few times was a different man, nothing to do with this one. I don't know if he has written to you.

I've asked around about the former, and his address is Mr. Victoriano Banciella's residence, Truébano, Buenavista, Oviedo. Buenavista is a neighborhood two miles from Oviedo, and it is divided up as well, and one of the divisions is Truébano, but it's all under Oviedo. I think all your letters will arrive using these directions.

In any case, I'll try to look for him and give him the letter you sent me.

I don't have anything else to tell you, although many things come to mind; and I would like to bare my entire soul on these pages, so that you might understand me clearly and pray to God for me. I don't doubt that you will, just as the novices and the community are.

Give my regards to Reverend Father Abbot. With affection, your brother in Jesus and Mary,

*Br. María Rafael*

## 62. to Rafael Arnáiz Sánchez de la Campa

Torrelodones, September 24, 1935<sup>512</sup>

J-H-S<sup>513</sup>

My dearest father,

I've been thinking of writing you for days now . . . but you know me, paper and pen (or pencil in this case, forgive the lack of respect) have never been friends of mine . . . but I don't want to put it off any longer.

Today, the name day of both Mercedes,<sup>514</sup> you've left the aforementioned rather dismayed when you told them over the phone that you didn't think the trip to Ávila was a good idea. And so, your son Rafael, behind their back, is begging you to write them a letter telling them the exact opposite, that is . . . that you think it's absolutely splendid, that you'd had the same idea, that it's totally logical, that *you see it their way*; you know,

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<sup>512</sup> After his sister Merceditas was diagnosed with a life-threatening case of peritonitis (an abdominal infection), Rafael accompanied her and their mother Mercedes as they sought medical treatment in Madrid. While there, the three stayed in nearby Torrelodones (VE 205–6).

<sup>513</sup> *J-H-S*: A common Christogram, or abbreviated version of the name of Christ. *JHS*, sometimes also spelled *IHS*, is derived from the first three letters of the name of Jesus in Greek.

<sup>514</sup> September 24 is the feast of Our Lady of Mercy (*Nuestra Señora de las Mercedes*), and thus the name day of both Rafael's mother and his sister.

*seeing another's way* is the eleventh commandment . . . In short, tell them what you think . . . but try to calm their spirits.

When we got back from Villasandino<sup>515</sup> they were quiet and pensive, in a bad mood, naturally . . . Being at the house was too much for us to handle, and we started to badmouth Bienvenida, because what else were we going to do? Your daughter didn't want to go to El Escorial, nor to Villalba which is so lovely;<sup>516</sup> things were getting ugly . . . She said she'd put on weight, that she was strong enough now, that she wanted the rain back in Oviedo, that she wanted to see Mino<sup>517</sup> . . . and so we kept badmouthing Bienvenida, and when we got back from the country nobody gave us one (a "*bienvenida*," that is).<sup>518</sup>

Well then, Rafael, get the car, let's go to the circus . . . The next day, Rafael, get the car again, let's go to the movies . . . Well, things continued to get ugly, because the girl didn't want to go toward Puerto, but if we went toward Madrid we wouldn't be able to stay in Las Rozas . . . anyway, you get it.

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<sup>515</sup> *Villasandino*: A town outside Burgos where the Arnáiz-Barón family owned a house (OC 381).

<sup>516</sup> El Escorial is a historical royal residence and monastery outside Madrid. Collado Villalba is a small town just north of Torrelodones.

<sup>517</sup> *Mino*: Short for Maximino, an unidentified acquaintance of the Arnáiz-Barón family (OC 382).

<sup>518</sup> *Bienvenida* means "welcome" in Spanish, although it also appears to be the name of the unidentified woman whom Merceditas and Rafael were criticizing.



We went to see Hernando,<sup>519</sup> and as you already know, he said there's no way she can go back to Asturias until later . . . Moaning and groaning . . . So movies again, and more movies, nothing else to be done. It's the only thing this poor Trappist can think of to console his sister. Hernando looked at her through rays while the German took snapshots. He said she's cured, and what's left will go away in this final phase, but the worst thing she could do is go to Oviedo, and until November she must remain on the Meseta.<sup>520</sup> That's what science says. Alas! There's no other way.

We argued about it and landed on . . . nothing, because whenever you argue with two women you don't land anywhere . . . But anyway, the point is we argued about it: Torrelodones or Villasandino. Torrelodones was all Madrid's cinemas and Bienvenida's dirty looks, poor thing, but what else were we going to do? Movies every day, or at least, an excuse to go to Madrid.

Well then, off to Villasandino, to suffer through the cold, the three of us all alone with Fr. Juan<sup>521</sup> . . . But anyway, we were decided; after all, a month goes quickly.

Mercedes *could not care less*; what she wants is the Oviedo rain and to use an umbrella again, and so on . . . and so on. Mamá speaks, argues, and makes plans, gracious

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<sup>519</sup> *Hernando*: A radiologist who attended to Merceditas (OC 382).

<sup>520</sup> *Meseta*: The Meseta Central (lit. "Central Plateau") are the highlands of central Spain, separated from Asturias in the north by the Cantabrian Mountains.

<sup>521</sup> *Fr. Juan*: Juan Martínez Barbero, the parish priest at Villasandino.

under pressure like a glider pilot . . . I go off to see Almenas.<sup>522</sup> We go to bed at nine.

Ramón<sup>523</sup> keeps at the fuel pump, and Father<sup>524</sup> taps away at the typewriter, getting very close to the keys and using just one finger . . . he makes me nervous.

We head to Ávila and spend the night at Uncle Polín's house.<sup>525</sup> We attend the consecration of Bp. Santos.<sup>526</sup> It is a moving ceremony. I thought of you a lot, you would have liked it. There's an indescribable enthusiasm about the new bishop, who is a holy man, adored by the people of Ávila.

Mercedes is delighted with Dolores<sup>527</sup> and her other cousins. I—forgive me for speaking of myself, as for quite some time now my preferences ought not to figure into the family's plans at all—I do what I ought and what I can, and nothing more. That's how God wants it . . . so all right. As I've said, I'm happy with it too. Ávila means so much to me, and I feel affection for it. For one thing, my aunt and uncle, who love me so much;

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<sup>522</sup> *Almenas*: José María de Palacio y Abárzuza, Count of Las Almenas, who lived at the Palace of Canto del Pico in Torrelodones. The mansion is better known as a longtime residence of Francisco Franco, to whom the Count left it in his will.

<sup>523</sup> *Ramón*: A domestic servant who worked for the Arnáiz-Barón family at Torrelodones.

<sup>524</sup> *Father*: Referred to only as the “parish priest” of Torrelodones, his name is unknown.

<sup>525</sup> *Uncle Polín*: Rafael's uncle, Leopoldo Barón Torres.

<sup>526</sup> *Bp. Santos*: Santos Moro Briz (1888–1980) was ordained Bishop of Ávila on September 22, 1935.

<sup>527</sup> *Dolores*: Dolores Barón y Osorio Moscoso, the eldest daughter of Rafael's aunt and uncle, María Osorio and Leopoldo Barón.

then there's the peace of the hometown of Saint Teresa, whom I see around every corner. My soul rejoices spiritually so much in Ávila, I don't know why . . . Mamá remembers Villasandino . . . the dusty road, the cold house, and the three of us with Fr. Juan in the afternoon. And without telling *anybody*, after Holy Mass, she goes off to see about a boarding house for eight *pesetas* a night and whether we might spend the remaining month of our time in Castile there.

When she comes back to the house and tells us about it, everyone bursts with excitement . . . The month of October is so nice here, it's sunny, sure it'll be cold here too, but you notice it less with people around. The girl loves the idea, and it doesn't strike me as absurd, so we go see the boarding house. We don't like it . . . We look at other accommodations, and at last, we see some rooms at the Hotel Inglés. There's lots of light, and a terrace for Mercedes to sunbathe on. It's 12.50 a night, but for the whole month they let us have it for 11 a night, full room and board.

We are all very pleased, the ghost of Villasandino has disappeared, and Mercedes is excited about her cousins. So, do you see it their way now? . . . I think so. I don't want to influence you, but I'm telling it like I see it, and if I must tell you the truth, the idea of Villasandino scared me a little. Not for my own sake, God knows, because I want for nothing when I have Him in the Tabernacle . . . But Mercedes has been sick for many months now,<sup>528</sup> and we miss you all very much.

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<sup>528</sup> Merceditas had been sick since at least September 1934, when her illness is first mentioned in Rafael's letters (see Letter 49).

That's all. As far as news, I'll say that Enrique Ortiz fought a young bull the other day . . . and broke a few of his ribs in the process. He is still complaining about his chest, but he's out of danger now, though it was very grave indeed. After all, he is fifty years old. Uncle Polín thinks the business with the tenant is all taken care of, he's off to Toro now . . . I'm getting the carbon buildup out of the car. And that's about it . . . They already took the piano, and on September 30 we're going to Ávila. Mercedes continues to put on weight; I think since you last saw her, it's been four and a half pounds, I'm not sure.<sup>529</sup>

Don't stop writing, that's why I'm writing you. Forgive your son for being a nuisance, all I want is for everyone to be happy.

Don't worry about money. First, if you consider the matter correctly before God, you'll see you have more than you deserve, and to complain is to offend Him; and second, when it runs out, it runs out . . . What do you want it for? The Lord and the Virgin watch over all of us, and won't abandon us.

Sending you a hug to share with my brothers, because everything is better when shared. See you soon. Your son,

*Rafael*

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<sup>529</sup> Both Mercedes and Rafael painstakingly tracked their weight when they fell sick, as a way of measuring their physical strength. During their respective illnesses, they noted increases in weight as signs of improvement.

## 63. to Leopoldo Barón

Ávila, October 1935<sup>530</sup>

My dearest Uncle Polín,

I suppose today that whole collection of papers, cards, flyers, and such they had at the Parents' Association will have gone out.

Yesterday I went at four, and between a grandfather and a son (this nephew of yours) we did what we could. There were quite a few people there at seven in the evening. We put lodging prices in the bulletins (which we had to take out of their envelopes and put back in) . . . Fr. Herrera is staying with the Sisters of Mary Reparatrix. We got permission from the bishop and the governor . . . the man with the litigation, I don't remember his name, did two reports . . . Anyway, everything is moving forward . . . They spent quite a few *pesetas* on stamps and such . . . As for things here, don't worry, everyone's very happy.

I don't need to tell you that I think of you very often, and I ask the Virgin at my Trapa to enlighten you . . . I assure you that with Her at your side, you don't need lawyers or attorneys, and I'm sure She has heard me; She loves me very much and never refuses me anything. All you have to do is talk, argue, and deal with men . . . If you suffer, all the better; God sees your intentions, and they alone are enough. He'll do the rest.

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<sup>530</sup> This undated letter was sent alongside one from Rafael's aunt, María Osorio, to her husband Leopoldo. He was away from the family's home in Ávila on business in Toro (OC 388).

Today I went to see Sor Pilar,<sup>531</sup> and, after an hour and a half with her, I placed myself at Jesus's feet to give Him thanks, because truly I do not deserve the consolations my good Jesus gives me. Who am I, Lord?

Anyway, Uncle Polín, just remember what I told you that one time . . . We come across many thorns in this world . . . but there are flowers too. Sometimes they're very tiny and you can hardly see them, but if you look for them, you'll find them . . . And then . . . how can we not give thanks to the Lord for His kindness toward us?

Take heart, Uncle Polín, because I am *sure* that even in the midst of all your suffering and sorrows, God will give you some consolation; you'll always have something to cheer you up . . . Some act of affection, or some fruit borne of your suffering . . . and if you get none of that, all the better, for as Sor Pilar told me so energetically this morning, "The greatest consolation is to have none at all."

Uncle Polín, forgive your nephew, who am I to give you consolation or relief? But since you know me by now, I want you to realize that I'm not trying to do that . . . Anyway, I've made a mess of it! . . . "*Sursum corda!!!*"<sup>532</sup>

I'm taking advantage of Aunt María's letter to send you this little note . . . Take from it nothing but my affection for you, as you know I truly have. Your nephew,

*Rafael*

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<sup>531</sup> *Sor Pilar*: Sor Pilar García, abbess of the Poor Clares at Ávila and a spiritual advisor to Rafael (see Letter 43).

<sup>532</sup> *Sursum corda*: "Lift up your hearts," the first line of the preface to the Eucharistic Prayer in the Mass.

Give my grandmother and Aunt María a million hugs for me.<sup>533</sup>

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<sup>533</sup> Rafael's maternal grandmother, Fernanda Torres, and aunt, María Josefa Barón Torres, who lived together in Toro.

## V. A New Call

### *Rafael's preparation to re-enter La Trapa, October 1935–January 1936*

As we saw in the previous section, Rafael fell into a serious vocational crisis after his exit from the monastery in May 1934. After a year and a half of prayer and consultation, as well as an increased understanding of his medical condition, he decided to request re-entrance to La Trapa as an oblate, rather than a monk.<sup>534</sup> Oblates, unlike monks, do not take vows and are able to observe modified diets, penances, and schedules—a status more conducive to Rafael's health. While staying in Ávila with his aunt and uncle, María Osorio and Leopoldo Barón, who encouraged him in this new vocation, Rafael wrote to the abbot at La Trapa in October 1935. In this letter, Rafael shared his understanding of what God was seeking to accomplish through his medical and vocational struggles:

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<sup>534</sup> “The oblate is a member of the community where he is received, without being canonically a member of the Order. [. . .] The oblature has the character of a promise of mutual fidelity on the part of the oblate and on the part of the community, and it does not of itself imply any vow. However, the oblate leads the monastic life according to the spirit of the vows of obedience, conversion of manners and stability. This mutual agreement is revocable on either side, but only for serious reasons” (*Constitutions and Statutes of the Monks and Nuns of the Cistercian Order of the Strict Observance and Other Legislative Documents* [Rome: Cistercian Order of the Strict Observance, 1990], 39).



My vocation was from God, and is of God, but it needed to be purified, its rough edges needed smoothing. I gave myself to the Lord generously, but I still wasn't giving Him *everything*; I gave Him my body, my soul, my career, my family . . . but I still held on to one thing: my dreams and desires, my hopes of being a Trappist and making my vows and singing the Mass. That kept me going at La Trapa, but God wants more, He always wants more. I needed to be transformed. He wanted His love alone to be enough for me.<sup>535</sup>

After receiving permission to re-enter as an oblate, Rafael returned to his parents' home in Oviedo, where remained until his return to La Trapa in January 1936. While he informed his father about his plan to depart after Christmas, they agreed to keep Rafael's mother in the dark about it until after the holidays.<sup>536</sup> Much like his preparation to enter the monastery the first time around, these letters are informed by Rafael's anxiety about causing his family grief, but they are also filled with a newfound hope that he had finally found what God was calling him to do.

The majority of the letters in this section pertain to a spiritual correspondence between Rafael and his aunt María, whom he wrote on a nearly daily basis during this period. To some extent, Rafael merely hoped to comfort her during a difficult time for her family. María was alone in Ávila while Leopoldo was away on business in Toro, desperately trying to resolve his family's debts.<sup>537</sup> On the other hand, this correspondence

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<sup>535</sup> Letter 64.

<sup>536</sup> Letter 69.

<sup>537</sup> See Letter 74.

reflects a role reversal between the two. María, like her husband Leopoldo, had been an important spiritual mentor for her young nephew, but Rafael now assumed the role of spiritual mentorship toward his aunt:

If only I could repay you some of what I owe [. . .] I learned so much from you. It's not that we are doing the opposite now, because even if you don't realize it, you are still doing me just as much good now as you did then. I never suspected that I was going to be able to pay you back. Blessed be God who permits such things.<sup>538</sup>

Because María served as such a confidant for Rafael, their letters provide particular insight into his physical, mental, and spiritual state during this period. While he had struggled with the seeming stagnation of his medical condition over the course of the previous year, he confided in María that he had come to think of his treatment plan as an offering to God: “I do what I can for my recovery, because if I'm going to serve God in La Trapa, I'm going to need my health . . . I do it all in His name . . . My good Jesus knows very well that it's all for Him.”<sup>539</sup> Meanwhile, his prayer life had gone from despairing confusion to explosive excitement:

My soul is a burning volcano about to erupt. I can't go on like this, Lord, I can't . . . I have this urge to lock myself away in the monastery, so that among men's silence, I can let God hear this clamor I carry around inside me, these cries that

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<sup>538</sup> Letter 72.

<sup>539</sup> Letter 93.

won't stop coming out . . . Have mercy, sister. You say that my letters are on fire, but I assure you, on the inside, I . . . Oh, the Lord is too great for a soul as small as mine.<sup>540</sup>

Their letters also touch on many of the themes that are essential to Rafael's spirituality, ideas that he would later develop with more detail in his monastic diaries. Among these themes is a devotion to Saints John of the Cross and Teresa of Ávila, whose writings he often used for meditation;<sup>541</sup> love for Mary, which he considered "the quickest way to begin to love God";<sup>542</sup> and humility, which he distinguished from obsession with one's own weakness. On this last point, he advised María:

I do indeed understand the joy of your littleness . . . my dear sister. I do indeed understand how your insignificance before God could be a consolation to your soul . . . But I'll say that while you ought not to stop feeling little and weak, you shouldn't stop to think about it too much, because that would be stopping to think about a creature, yourself, and since you are worthless . . . Just leave it be, and instead of your littleness, consider God's greatness. Instead of your wretchedness, consider God's virtues . . . Instead of your little love for the Lord, consider the immense, magnificent love He has for you."<sup>543</sup>

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<sup>540</sup> Letter 75.

<sup>541</sup> See Letter 70.

<sup>542</sup> Letter 71.

<sup>543</sup> Letter 78.

While Rafael's correspondence with María certainly provided them both with great spiritual support, it also helped them both through a difficult period in their respective family situations. In addition to Rafael's own plans, the rest of his family happened to be going their separate ways as well. His brother Luis Fernando was completing his university studies in Leuven, Belgium, and had only come home briefly for Christmas. His sister Merceditas had fallen ill, and was planning to head for Madrid to seek medical treatment, accompanied by their mother. That left Rafael's father, and his brother Leopoldo, to accompany him back to La Trapa, where he officially re-entered as an oblate on January 11, 1936.

**64. To Dom Félix Alonso García**

Ávila, October 9, 1935

J-H-S

Reverend and dear Father Abbot,

I have offered many prayers to the Most Blessed Virgin before beginning this letter, and spent a lot of time consulting Jesus by the Tabernacle . . . The time has come for me to decide to open my heart to my superiors at once, in order to tell them my decision and the journey my soul has made.

Reverend Father, I want you to understand my words, which, though clumsy, are sincere, and for you to be merciful toward me. And so, I have asked God for this.

Reverend Father, I've been away from my beloved Trapa for nearly a year and a half now, and if only you knew, Reverend Father, how great a work the Lord has done in me! . . . And how grateful I am to Him for the trial that He is making me endure . . . I've often thought about how unworthy I am, that Jesus should care for me, but how could He not? . . . Do I not care for Him? God is so good, and He knows what He is doing, and sometimes He uses the least and most miserable of all earthly things in order to make known His majesty.

When I requested that you admit me into the community two years ago, writing from this same Ávila, my desire was good and holy; I was searching for God, and God gave Himself to me so freely . . . I suffered, but when it's for His sake, it's not suffering . . . I had hopes and dreams, I wanted to be holy, I thought with delight about the Choir, about being a real monk someday . . . There was so much happening within me, Reverend

Father . . . I was searching for God, but I was also searching for His creatures, and I was searching for myself; and God wants me all to Himself . . . My vocation was from God, and is of God, but it needed to be purified, its rough edges needed smoothing. I gave myself to the Lord generously, but I still wasn't giving Him *everything*; I gave Him my body, my soul, my career, my family . . . but I still held on to one thing: my dreams and desires, my hopes of being a Trappist and making my vows and singing the Mass. That kept me going at La Trapa, but God wants more, He always wants more. I needed to be transformed. He wanted His love alone to be enough for me.

With a novice's zeal, I offered Him . . . I offered Him something, but I didn't know what. I thought I didn't have anything left to give Him, that my life was the one thing I had left, and that He already knew it was His.

Reverend Father, I have nothing else to tell you; God sent me a trial, and at first I thought it meant that God didn't love me, that His will was different, but He doesn't ask for our opinion or explain Himself when He sends us something that's good for us. Weak creatures, what do you know of God's designs! He'll handle doing the work without consulting us. All we have to do is let ourselves be shaped in His hands, and hold still, very still; later, the time and light He has sent us will allow us to see His work clearly, and then we will give Him infinite thanks for His loving care.

How many tears must be shed before one is willing to kiss the cross! First we ask for a cross, and then we cry when it is given to us; but once we are on it, how happy we are to find ourselves at Christ's side . . . Though He is a God, He died on the cross for us; so if we truly love Him, the cross ought to be and must be our delight. Isn't that so?

Forgive me, Reverend Father, I've gone astray from where I should be; I'll return to the purpose of my letter.

I was at the monastery about a year ago, and I shared how I was feeling at the time with Fr. Marcelo and with Your Reverence.<sup>544</sup> I asked Fr. Marcelo if it would be possible for me to one day enter as an oblate,<sup>545</sup> because of the diet I have to follow; he said yes, and Your Reverence told me to wait . . . I have waited, for the will of my superiors is the will of God . . . I have waited a year, which seemed like a century to me. The Most Blessed Virgin has upheld me in my vocation; the Lord has given me to understand that the world is not my place, that He wants me beside the Tabernacle—and, Reverend Father, to the Tabernacle I wish to go.

Once more, then, I ask the community to admit this poor man, who neither wants nor desires anything more than to dwell in the house of God.

I don't deserve to be a monk . . . Singing Holy Mass . . . Lord, if I am to see you so soon, what does it matter? . . . The vows . . . do I not love God with all my strength? Then what do vows matter? None of that prevents me from being at His side, dedicating my silence among men to Him, and loving Him quietly and humbly in the simplicity of

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<sup>544</sup> Rafael spoke with the abbot alongside Fr. Marcelo León, master of novices, on the visit of November 21, 1934 (OC 392).

<sup>545</sup> *Oblate*: A lay member of a monastery who does not take vows and observes a modified schedule (see Manuscript 7).

the oblation.<sup>546</sup> Saint Benedict admitted oblates, and some of them became saints. Why should I not be among them? . . . Of my own strength I cannot, but with Jesus and Mary at my side, I can do all things. When I fall, They will help me.

Your Reverence will speak of the humiliation this entails, the fact of being nothing and no one. But am I someone now? As for humiliation, I don't believe I will feel that way, because in order for a soul to be humbled it must first be up high and then be brought low, and I don't think I have to be brought low at all. Quite the contrary, the real humiliation is when a creature is exalted in the eyes of men and women, because when that person stands before God, so wretched and wicked in His divine eyes while so extolled by men . . . then he will know true humiliation.

Forgive me, and be merciful to me, Reverend Father—but surely the miter that the Lord has placed in your hands is more of a humiliation than being assigned the lowest place in a Trappist monastery. Did God not humble Himself? That can indeed be called humiliation, but when it comes to us? That word does not apply to us, insignificant dust that we are. Look what I'm saying, my good Father Abbot! Take all this as the ramblings of someone madly in love with God . . . and if I fail to show you the respect I owe you, forgive me, but I want you to know everything I am thinking and how I am feeling about it, and when I sat down to write, I promised to expose my soul completely.

There are so many things I'd say to you, if only I knew how to write. It gives me such joy to think of how God loves me, the path down which He is guiding me, the

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<sup>546</sup> *Oblature*: The status of being an oblate (comparable to “the novitiate” for the status of being a novice).



undeserved light He gives me . . . But of course, I have God, and God has hold of me; what more could I desire? I spoke to you of the cross before, but with Him I no longer have one. My sorrows and the tears I poured out for Him have turned into peace and calm. I have the Lord; let me live beside His Tabernacle, eating the crumbs that fall from the convent's table, and I'll be happy . . . happy in my nothing, and joyous in my Everything, who is Jesus.

Your Reverence, do you see the work of God now? He has accomplished the greatest and most admirable work in me, a creature of His who—and I don't say this with insincerity or false modesty—has nothing and deserves nothing; I have only sins to offer such a good God . . . I possess neither virtue nor knowledge, but I do know what I am . . . and God knows it too. I might be able to fool human beings, but I can't fool Him.

Tell me, Reverend Father, if my vocation is not from God. Enlighten me if I am deceived; have no mercy. Jesus made use of a harsh blow to make me see clearly before. But if Your Reverence goes before God and considers my situation, you will see a man who, despite everything, is still thinking of his Trapa.

It has been two years (or it will be two in January) since I entered the novitiate. Even so, perhaps not in the eyes of men, but certainly in the eyes of God, I have not ceased for even a moment to be Brother Rafael, Cistercian novice. I assure you that, even if I were to spend the rest of my life in the world, in spirit I would continue to be a Trappist. I carry it deep within me, and the Virgin of La Trapa is always at my side. I am sure that She wants me there, and She wants me to inhabit the humility of which She is an example to us.

I fear only one thing, and that is to fail to be a good example to the community in the observance of the holy Rule, but God wishes to take even that from me, which is a great consolation. Of course, being despised and being no one is a consolation too, and a much greater one, but that is out of my hands and I am not seeking it either.

The other day, a very holy nun<sup>547</sup> whom I went to consult about my decision told me that the Lord would give me so much more this way than if I continued to be a choir novice.<sup>548</sup> I also recall what Your Reverence told me when I entered the monastery, that God would repay me even in this world for the sacrifice I was making . . . Anyway, as God well knows, I don't follow God for any of that now . . . I love God just because, and that's it. Even though I love God very little, my love isn't mercenary. I know that He loves me, and that is enough for me.

It is a very great mortification to follow the Rule and observe the fasts, but perhaps it is an even greater one to have to take an indulgence.<sup>549</sup>

I still haven't brought up my health, and well, it is the least of my concerns. I'm doing about the same, I carry on with my normal life other than when it comes to food. I could follow the Rule for many years, even. Diabetes is simply a matter of a particular type of diet: switching out some foods for others, maybe taking indulgences . . . Medication by way of injections from time to time, and that's it.

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<sup>547</sup> Sor Pilar García, abbess of the Poor Clares at Ávila (see Letter 43).

<sup>548</sup> *Choir novice*: When Rafael first entered the monastery, he was called a “choir novice” because he was in formation to become a “choir monk,” as distinct from a lay brother.

<sup>549</sup> *Indulgence*: A reprieve from the usual monastic fare at mealtimes (see Letter 31).

If what I am attempting were absurd on a practical level, I wouldn't have even dared to propose it to Your Reverence. I am merely holding onto Fr. Marcelo's words: that there are many cases like mine, or very similar to mine, in many of the monasteries in France.

If a donation is necessary in order to avoid burdening the community, I don't think my father would refuse me, but they don't know anything yet. I'm waiting for your reply before talking to them; I don't think they'd have or raise any objections.

In any case, I will wait for Your Reverence to decide and give me your answer about what I ought to do, or if I should come speak to you in person. Everything else can wait until afterwards. It's all in Mary's hands.

In Madrid, I went to see a doctor who is well known in this field, and he told me that I have a light form of pancreatic diabetes that will eventually correct itself, but in the meantime I should not consume excessive starch or sugar. I just have to be careful. I wouldn't have any trouble following this diet in the monastery, whether in the refectory in the infirmary, it's all the same to me; or in the guesthouse, if Your Reverence so instructs. Ultimately, when we go up to receive the Lord at Communion, He doesn't ask us if we have eaten this or that. He is the same for everyone in the community, isn't that so? He won't love me any less than Br. *Damián* or Br. *Bernardo*<sup>550</sup> because they eat bread and beans while I eat milk and eggs. God has arranged it thus, so He must know best. When we are all reunited in His presence, and the day is coming soon, such small

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<sup>550</sup> *Br. Damián, Br. Bernardo*: Rafael's co-novices when he first entered the monastery; see Letter 28.

differences will fade away. They are merely human differences, and we must dispense with all that is human, not just in heaven but also here on earth. For if we view everything supernaturally, everything brings us to God: both the rigorous fast of the one who can observe it, and the care taken by the one who is sick, amid all his miseries. Thus I return to my theme, Reverend Father: we who have God have everything. What does the rest of it matter?

I'm not writing to Fr. Marcelo because I know that he's sick and is not in the novitiate.<sup>551</sup> Please give him my kind regards, and the same to the whole community. My regards also to my confessor, Fr. Teófilo, who is often in my thoughts, for I have found myself so alone on so many occasions, and in such doubt, that I've had much to offer God, although it is all rather little.

Of course, I've also consulted souls who are very much of God, and they have enlightened me quite a bit. For most of the time that I've been away from La Trapa, however, I have been face to face only with God, and even that was only when He did not hide Himself from me. May He be blessed, for I certainly deserved that; my sins have not been few.

If only you knew, Reverend Father, how much the Virgin has helped me! She lifted me up when I fell, upheld me over all the threats I have faced in my vocation, and consoled me when I found myself struggling against the world, which is so clingy . . . Whether I'd been good, bad, or something in between, at seven in the evening when I

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<sup>551</sup> Fr. Marcelo León passed away on October 1, 1935 (OC 396). He had been succeeded as master of novices by Fr. José Olmedo Arrieta on July 7, 1935 (OC 397).

united myself to my brothers in choir and prayed the *Salve* to her, I felt a seeming consolation at the thought of the Virgin uniting me to La Trapa; She was protecting us all, gazing upon us all, both the Trappists in their monastery and me wherever I found myself. What would become of us were it not for Her?

Forgive me, Reverend Father, this letter is going on too long . . . this is an outlet for me. It's so difficult to speak of love for God and the Virgin in the world.

Tell Br. Ramón<sup>552</sup> to pray for me, and that I think of him often. He has been very much on my mind, because he suffered, just as I did, in leaving it all behind, and that is very difficult . . . His prayers must be very pleasing to the Lord.

There are so many things I'd like to ask you to tell all my brothers, Fr. Francisco, Buenaventura, Br. Tescelino<sup>553</sup> . . . everyone. They'll think I forgot, but souls who love one another for God's sake never forget, and in loving each other they love God. Loving Him in His creatures is a great consolation, and it takes nothing away from His glory; at least, if I am not mistaken.

Answer me, Reverend Father, I beg you for the sake of charity; it shall bring consolation to my soul to learn that I may still, however unworthily, begin my name with the "Brother María" of the Cistercians.

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<sup>552</sup> Ramón Vallaura Fernández-Peña (1914–1996), the younger brother of Rafael's close friend Juan Vallaura (see Letter 9). Ramón entered the novitiate at San Isidro on July 22, 1935 (OC 398).

<sup>553</sup> For Fr. Francisco, see Letter 33; for Fr. Buenaventura and Br. Tescelino, see Letter 42.

Your Reverence can expect an oblate who wants only to give glory to God, to love Him, and to serve Him, a soul who wants nothing, and surrenders to Him even the desire to be professed, for He asks him to. And believe me, I surrender not with any violence to myself, but with pleasure and joy.

I will try to be a holy oblate with the aid of heaven, the counsel of my good superiors, and the help of my community, whom I ask to remember me in their prayers.

Humbly asking your blessing, your novice in Jesus and Mary,

*Brother María Rafael*

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*O.C.R.*<sup>554</sup>

P.S. For the full month of October, I will be with my mother and my sister at the Hotel Inglés in Ávila, from which I will go directly to Oviedo. I ask that you send your reply to my aunt and uncle's house, since I do not want my mother to learn of my plans until the latest possible moment. Their address is: Duke of Maqueda, San Juan de la Cruz, 4 – Ávila.

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<sup>554</sup> *O.C.R.*: *Orden Cisterciense Reformada*, or Reformed Cistercian Order (see Letter 39).

## 65. to Leopoldo Barón

Ávila, October 1935<sup>555</sup>

My dearest Uncle Polín,

When Aunt María writes you, your nephew cannot be far behind . . . Just as well, with so little time left. As you know, we leave on Monday. Don't rush over here, let's not force what's not meant to be. If I can give you a hug, fine. If not, that's fine too, what does it matter? . . . That's what the Rafael in my head says, but as for the real one—poor Rafa, he loves his aunt and uncle so much!

Yesterday we went to Madrid. Aunt María didn't want to come . . . but she came. I'm telling you, Uncle Polín, between the Lord's kindness toward me and the charity of those He places in my path, I don't know what to do with myself. What is the Lord's desire?

Today Aunt María, my mother, and I went to the Shrine of Our Lady of Sonsoles<sup>556</sup> . . . We spent a long time there praying the Holy Rosary. Then, at the feet of Our Lady, I thought about many things, one of which was a poor man who was off in Toro trying to collect some *pesetas* . . . Perhaps it is the Lord who wants to collect from you, rather than you collecting from men.

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<sup>555</sup> This letter is undated.

<sup>556</sup> *Shrine of Our Lady of Sonsoles*: A shrine and hermitage in Ávila dedicated to Mary. The name *Sonsoles* derives from a local devotion to Saint Zoilus (*San Zoilo*), an early Christian said to be martyred by the Romans at Córdoba, Spain.

I am praying to the Virgin that you will be generous and not mess around. You hear me, Uncle Polín? . . . Anyway, I don't mean to give you advice (too many cooks already). You know better than I do, there's so much that I don't need to say to you . . . just remember who all this is coming from, and be merciful to me.

Aunt María asked me to tell you to write to Mr. Luis.

Pilar<sup>557</sup> has a fever tonight, but don't worry, she's gotten better over the past few days while she's been in bed . . . God is watching over all of us.

I don't have anything else to say. Give my grandmother and Aunt María and "little Ropi" lots of hugs for me.<sup>558</sup> As always, your brother and nephew, more the former than the latter,

*Br. M. Rafael*

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<sup>557</sup> *Pilar*: Pilar Barón y Osorio Moscoso, Rafael's cousin and Leopoldo's daughter.

<sup>558</sup> Rafael's maternal grandmother, Fernanda Torres Erro; his aunt, María Josefa Barón Torres; and friend, Rosa "Ropi" Calvo all lived in Toro, where Leopoldo was visiting.



**66. to Leopoldo Barón**

Ávila, October 1935<sup>559</sup>

My dearest brother in the Lord, Uncle Polín,

Today I went sightseeing with Juan Vallaure and Arraiza,<sup>560</sup> who came here to spend the day with me. I'm a bit tired, because even though they love me very much, I can promise you that I got used to something so . . . different that even the good ones tire me out somewhat . . . Everything is for God.

We leave on Monday, God willing; as to our return . . . we are all in God's hands, and that's a very good thing, don't you think?

When I get to Oviedo I'll write you and Aunt María a very, very long letter. Right now I can't put anything into words; I'm rather out of it. I haven't been able to go make my visit<sup>561</sup> or anything . . . I think the Lord stirs up our spirits just so that we might truly come to know what it is to be at peace.

I am very pleased. I see God at work in someone whom I love dearly . . . It's an extraordinary thing . . . Uncle Polín, if we could truly see, we wouldn't know what to do

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<sup>559</sup> This letter is undated.

<sup>560</sup> Juan Vallaure, Rafael's close friend (see Letter 9); Eugenio Arraiza Vilella, their mutual friend and classmate at the Higher Technical School of Architecture of Madrid (OC 401).

<sup>561</sup> *Make my visit*: that is, make an hour of Eucharistic Adoration, which Rafael called his daily "visit with the Lord."

with ourselves. What have we done? What does the Lord want? I don't know what I'm talking about, may God forgive me, and may you as well.

May the peace of the Lord be with you. Your nephew,

*Br. M. Rafael*

**67. Dedication of a holy card to Dolores Barón Osorio<sup>562</sup>**

Ávila, October 25, 1935

Dolores,

All I can tell you about the Virgin Mary is this: in the world and in La Trapa and wherever I find myself, the Virgin has helped me in some way . . . in a way only She knows how.

You don't have to be a saint to love her very much. Just do it, and you'll find that the thorns you come across on your path soften with Mary's help, and perhaps even become flowers.

No, Dolores, you don't have to be a saint to love Her, the consolation and refuge of sinners.

I assure you that with a little love for God and lots for the Virgin, even here on earth you'll have everything your Trappist cousin hopes for you. Whenever he comes to mind, I beg you, pray to Her for him.

*Brother María Rafael O.C.R.*

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<sup>562</sup> Dolores Barón Osorio was Rafael's cousin, the daughter of Leopoldo Barón and María Osorio.

**68. Dedication of a holy card to María Osorio**

Ávila, October 27, 1935<sup>563</sup>

Feast of Christ the King<sup>564</sup>

J.H.S.

After giving it a good deal of thought, I'll pray for *nothing* for you, and I'll say nothing to you either, my dearest aunt María. That way, I'm praying for *everything*, and saying everything to you too.

Souls who love one another in God have need of silence . . . let us be silent, then, so that you in the world and I in my monastery might both let ourselves be filled with the love for Jesus that unites us so closely.

Everything is passing away, consolations, afflictions, sorrows, and joys alike, but love for God, our only reason for living, remains. Love flickering out or fully aflame. Love in silence or love out loud. Love in peacetime or love in wartime. What does it matter? As He wishes, but may our lives on earth be nothing more than that: Love!!

May that love for God be all that remains when our souls are united before the Tabernacle. God, who sees all things and understands us, will unite us even closer the more we love Him. That is my prayer. Your brother in Jesus,

*Rafael*

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<sup>563</sup> This holy card featured Saints Teresa of Ávila and Thérèse of Lisieux. María Osorio later gave it to her friend Lili Álvarez, a prominent tennis player and journalist (OC 404).

<sup>564</sup> At the time, the feast of Christ the King was celebrated on the last Sunday of October.

**69. to Dom Félix Alonso García**

Oviedo, November 7, 1935

J.H.S.

My dear and Reverend Father,

I am writing you from Oviedo, where I arrived a few days ago with my family. The object of my letter is simply to inform Your Reverence and fill you in on the details of how the Lord is clearing the way for me, after facing so many obstacles in my vocation . . . obstacles that I now see were necessary. May the Lord be blessed for all of it.

The other day, after asking Our Lady, the Virgin Mary, for her help, I spoke to my father. Clearly and in detail, I told him of my plans and the conditions under which Your Reverence charitably admitted me into the monastery once more. He found our reasoning very fair and prudent, and even though I had more or less been counting on that, I continue to praise God for everything and for my father's generosity toward me.

He told me that not only would he not stand in my way, but that he would now and forever try to help me morally and spiritually for the sake of my happiness, which he clearly sees is within my monastery.

He found it very fair that he should provide a donation in order to avoid burdening the community. As to the amount, I told him that it would be best for him to speak with Your Reverence about it when we come to the monastery . . . It would be better in person, don't you think? He told me he'd do as Your Reverence sees fit.

As for the timing, all we've decided so far is that I'll spend Christmastime at home. My brother Fernando will be coming from Belgium, and if I can give them the

consolation of spending Christmas all together . . . I should. That's what Your Reverence advised me to do, and I believe generosity deserves to be repaid with generosity, and I can do nothing else.

Therefore, the latest I'll arrive at La Trapa would be approximately January 15, the same date on which I entered two years ago.

If I may, Reverend Father, I must tell you how pleased I am. I don't know how to thank the Lord for such a blessing. I'd be an absolute fool not to become holy now . . . but the Lord will help me.

My good Christian father sends his regards (my mother doesn't know anything yet); give mine to the whole community. Awaiting Your Reverence's blessing, your novice,

*Brother María Rafael*

*O.C.R.*

C/O Argüelles 39, no. 3, Oviedo.

70. to María Osorio

Oviedo, November 8, 1935

J-H-S

My dearest aunt and sister in the Lord, María,

Your letter was such a consolation to me. If I hadn't gone to bed so late last night, you'd have already received my letter and it would have crossed paths with yours, as you predicted.

I want to tell you so many things! How sorrowful I was to see you cry in Ávila when we left . . . ! And that I should be the cause! May it all serve Him.

Nothing you said about the consolation and peace you received from the Lord upon reading Saint John of the Cross surprises me in the least. I experienced the same thing . . . The day before, at Sonsoles, we read, "I will not gather flowers, nor fear wild beasts . . ." <sup>565</sup> Well, I spent the whole ride home with that on my mind, with Mary's help . . . I saw places, people, and panoramas pass by; gripping the steering wheel tightly, and yes, very much wanting to cry, I kept going down the highway without stopping . . .

I had just left behind in Ávila many of the flowers that Saint John of the Cross speaks of . . . The Lord asks me to keep going and not stop. What am I to do? What I

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<sup>565</sup> From the third stanza of the *Spiritual Canticle*: "Seeking my Love / I will head for the mountains and for watersides, / I will not gather flowers, / nor fear wild beasts; / I will go beyond strong men and frontiers" (John of the Cross, *Collected Works*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez [Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1991], 471).

always do: look up, up high . . . and keep going and not stop . . . You ought to do the same. The Virgin is gazing upon you, and God is helping you; don't be concerned with crying or laughing, what's the difference? Clay is clay, we can't change what we are. The important thing is that this clay be given back to God, so may He do as He pleases with it, and may *everything* bring us toward Him.

How difficult it is not to gather flowers! But how easy it is, too . . . Once the initial break has been made, God draws us in such a way, with such gentleness, that it's no struggle at all . . . What difference does it make to cry? . . . Cry as much as you can; laugh and rejoice as much as you can, what does it matter! You're the one who is doing the laughing and crying . . . and you're nobody, you're nothing . . . And believe me, dearest sister—you won't mind if I call you that?—believe me, when you realize that . . . when you become detached from everything, including *your own self*, only then will you see: everything that happens to us is completely inconsequential. Neither suffering nor rejoicing will draw our gaze . . . Then we shall be able to see God better . . . Let's not look at ourselves so much . . . and if we do look at ourselves, and scrutinize ourselves, let it be in order to seek out the God hidden within us.

The other day, even amid my affliction and sorrow, there were moments in which I forgot everything and delighted in God right there in the middle of the highway. Everything was passing by so quickly! . . . Everything was so small, even me, so insignificant in God's eyes . . . I was in such a rush to see Him . . . I didn't know what I was doing. "I will not gather flowers," I thought . . . What flowers? Have I gathered any flowers? No . . . I can't stop, there's no need to make an effort, I don't need to stop . . . even if I wanted to, *God wouldn't let me*. This happens to you too, right?



What a joy, Lord! Send me whatever You want, be it flowers or thorns. What difference does it make to me? . . . I mustn't stop to look at anything, because I have enough to look at in You. You fill us in such a way, You love us in such a way, that everything disappears before You and we are left with nothing . . . !

What a joy it is, Lord, to be able to see You and not have to see ourselves! . . . What's the difference between flowers and thorns if You are the one who gives them, who brings them to us and takes them away? We do nothing, for nothing is all we know how to do; You do everything . . . If we speak of the cross, it is so that we might complain selfishly; if we seek consolation, we seek it in ourselves; if we want to love You, we do it wickedly and don't even know it . . .

What a joy it is, Lord, to think that You do everything for us! . . . And so it is all great and beautiful.

Lord, I cannot stop, because when I stop it is only in order to seek myself, and I find nothing in myself that is worth the effort . . . I must continue moving toward You. What do I care about flowers? What do I care about thorns? I have You, I have Your love, I have everything . . . What a joy to find oneself in nothing, with nothing.

Alongside these thoughts, the journey to Oviedo continued . . . I left many things by the side of the road, but I didn't want them. God was waiting for me on the horizon, so I couldn't stop, nor did I want to.

It's so difficult to detach yourself . . . but once you are detached, it's easier to fly. Afterwards, I prayed Hail Marys, that God might help you the way He was helping me.

We arrived in Oviedo at six-thirty. We ate in León and got through the trip perfectly, without anyone getting carsick.

Today I'm staying at home alone. My parents and my brother and sister went to *Infiesto*.<sup>566</sup> I have time now to collect my thoughts for you, so I will.

You say that I've done you a great deal of good . . . if you say so, I believe you. Sometimes the Lord uses the lowest of the low to realize His work. You've asked me to help you become holy . . . I read what you write me, I look up at God, and it seems to me that He is smiling . . . Either you are very humble, or I am crazy . . . Either way, the Lord knows best. And if you tell me straightforwardly that I can help you . . . then I'll straightforwardly respond that everything I am and everything that is in my power is yours already . . . I united myself to your prayers . . . and what's more, I've offered so many things to the Lord that I need not write you a thing in order for you to get where He wants you to go . . . and don't you stop on the way.

You think of me often? . . . If that helps you to turn to God, it's a good thing. I think of you too, and how when we were sitting in the car, you asked me to talk to you about God. I was a bit taken aback by that, but later on I realized I wasn't the one speaking . . . you already know that; what I said had the same effect on me that it did on you . . . Talk about God! . . . talk and talk . . . until I had to fall silent, you remember? I will always remember that. I see nothing bad in it. If a creature is useful in getting us to God, why would we be rid of it? . . . Whether through presence or through memory . . . it's all useful. We are like children still, and the sweets and candies that the Father gives

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<sup>566</sup> *Infiesto*: a town east of Oviedo. The siblings Rafael mentions here are Leopoldo and Mercedes; his brother Luis Fernando was studying in Belgium at the time (OC 409).

us make us love Him more. The day is coming when we will love Him without needing any gift in return. Maybe it's already here.

Tell me whatever you want and in whatever manner you please. I understand you, and while I am not worthy of your expectations, your letters will be read, answered, and destroyed. Do the same with mine. What do we need papers for? I am writing you in confidence.<sup>567</sup> And keep only what suits you from what you read here, and ignore the rest of it. Pay no mind to anything but my intentions, which are, of course, honorable. I asked the Lord and Mary for light before sitting down to write, and if They guide me in great things then surely they guide me in little ones too. Although I haven't done anything great yet, at least not what people consider great. Rather, everything in me is little. I just wish my love were great . . . but you know very well that I don't have room.

Anyway, pay me no mind. I'm just talking nonsense and being mad . . . you know what I mean?

When we got to Oviedo, all I could think about was looking for an opportunity to talk to my Christian father, and I asked the Virgin for one . . . I couldn't calm down, I was uneasy. My secret<sup>568</sup> wouldn't let me rest. On Tuesday morning,<sup>569</sup> I asked the Lord what I should do. He gave me to understand that I should take this step that very day, and that He would be with me.

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<sup>567</sup> Rafael kept his side of the bargain, but María obviously did not destroy her nephew's letters (OC 410).

<sup>568</sup> *My secret*: That is, that he had been re-admitted to La Trapa.

<sup>569</sup> *Tuesday*: November 5.

Indeed, my father and I went to make our visit to the Lord that afternoon . . . I held on to Our Lady tightly, and when we left the church, I told him everything, as gently and clearly as possible . . . Just a few minutes later, I was kneeling at the Virgin's feet, giving thanks. I still am, I'm telling you . . . How great God is, my dear sister! How He loves us! If only you knew . . . My father was so *thrilled*. He told me that he only wanted me to be happy, that he wanted me to become holy so that I could make him holy, that God loved us so much, that he thought everything that was being asked of him<sup>570</sup> was great and very reasonable and very fair, and that he would always help me.

In short, his was a generosity that only Christ's charity could provide. He said I should go whenever I wanted, and all he asked of me was to help him from the monastery, that he might place himself in God's hands in everything and for any reason. He said he had surrendered his will to that of God, and that he wanted me to become very holy, for my sake and for his.

What do you think? How could I not love God, how could I not drown myself in Him?! I thought I'd go mad with joy. I love Him so much! . . . What did I do, oh God of mine? What are sorrows and tears worth, if we get results like these in exchange?

God heard me then and He is listening to me now, I know it, I can tell. I don't know what to do with myself, I'm a wreck, as you'd say . . . I knew God loved me, but I didn't know it was this much! . . . Love Him dearly, Aunt María, and maybe between the

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<sup>570</sup> Rafael was re-admitted to the monastery on the condition that his father would make a regular donation to provide for his care (OC 411).

two of us we can do something . . . I don't know, I feel so helpless, so small, I just don't know . . .

Love Him dearly, make up for what is lacking in me . . . I want to be surrounded only by souls who love God dearly . . . then I'd be calmer . . . Love him dearly, Aunt María, I beg you. If only you knew . . . you wouldn't cry, you wouldn't laugh, you wouldn't be able to do anything but love. But when the Lord gives us this nervousness and exhaustion that we go through for His sake . . . He must know why He is doing it.

I wish I could be quiet and not write any more, but I can't. You don't mind if I tell you that I love God very much, right? Forgive me, and destroy this letter . . . I don't know if I am doing the right thing . . .

I can't have the peace you wish for me as long as I go on like this . . . What I wish for you is . . . just that, lots of love for Jesus . . . that Jesus who does nothing but give and give, who gives even though He gets nothing in return . . . What sorrow! What joy! Do you know what I mean? I want to go crazy.

Anyway, I don't know what I'm talking about anymore.

Yesterday I wrote Father Abbot. Three times I tore up the letter and started over. I'll go after Christmas; generosity deserves to be repaid with generosity, right? . . . My mother still doesn't know anything; my father and I agree that she shouldn't be told until the last possible minute, what good would it do? . . . My mother and sister keep making plans, but I've asked my father not to make me go back to Ávila . . . He understood, and he told me that if Mamá and Mercedes go to Ávila, I'll go to La Trapa. What do you think?

We can still write each other in these coming months, and write about God; He takes care of everything, while we . . . we have nothing to do. Remember? . . . You're so good to me. It gives me such joy to think that in this world, I truly have a little sister whom I can help and be helped by in this endeavor to love God like giants—even though we are children, and very small ones at that . . . But we can do anything with His help . . . doesn't that make you happy?

You, of course, have helped me more than you know . . . When we're in heaven, you'll see.

There are so many things I'd say to you . . . Don't stop writing me. In doing so, you are performing a great work of mercy, even though I am not alone . . . the Lord is present with me at all times, and with Him, I want for nothing.

Write me all the same, though, won't you? . . . Take heart, my dear sister. You are very little now, but with Him, you can do anything . . . You aren't totally detached from the world yet. You still live in it, but that doesn't matter; you'll manage it sooner or later, I hope. God loves you so much, and He wants you to give Him everything.

You've asked me for a spark or two . . . do you know what you're asking? . . . I'll stay quiet and not say anything, because there's no need. Just know that your brother, Br. M. Rafael, doesn't want to share what you think he has in excess . . . rather, he asks the Lord to give you the love I am unworthy to possess . . . May a lively flame burn within you, and thus with your love for God you can return to Him all the love He has for me . . . How selfish I am! Don't you think?

Don't you go thinking that the things you tell me are "silly" or "simpleminded." Maybe to someone else they would be, but not me. I can't tell you anything you don't

already know either. Brilliance is not to be expected of either of us . . . But the Lord sees it all, and that is enough for us. If our simplemindedness leads us to God . . . then may it be blessed. Loving God is so easy!

It consoles me so greatly to know that you have wept at the Virgin's feet . . . Isn't it true that She consoles us? Don't you love Her more now? . . . I know you don't forget to say the *Salve*. Who knows what your tears have earned for me . . . perhaps many things . . . I'm telling you, I count on the Virgin for everything, and there's nothing She could do to surprise me . . . Love her dearly, nothing we do for Her is ever enough . . . If only you knew how much She loves us Trappists!!

I'm so happy to know your prayer schedule. I'll make sure to ask Her to help you, and rather than helping you from above, I'll be giving you a lift from below, helping you climb . . . Anyway, Aunt María—that is, “my dear sister,” isn't that what we agreed on—I don't want to mix in anything human, as you'd say, with this letter . . . but I didn't take my weakness into account, and it is very great indeed . . . I want to finish up, but I don't know. I love you so much! . . . And I love you in God and with God in such a way that I don't know what else to say to you.

Forgive this poor man and pray for him . . . Don't love me, because I'm just a creature . . . And if you knew me well, scorn is all you'd have for me . . . I say that nearly in tears. God knows it. I don't know when we'll see each other next, but of course, when you do see me, I'll be wearing my Cistercian hood<sup>571</sup> . . . We need not grow apart on that

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<sup>571</sup> Rafael implies here that he wouldn't return to Ávila before re-entering La Trapa, but he did in fact make one final visit (OC 414).

account. Quite the contrary: without seeing one another, we'll still continue down the same path, a path of humble, quiet love that leads to God. We'll meet again in Him.

I wanted this letter to go out today, but I had a friend over . . . I ran out of time, so it wasn't possible.

I can't yet tell you what exact hours I keep in the house of God, because right now I'm always going with my father and I adjust my schedule to his . . . If you could see what joy it brings me to see him at Mass and Communion, and not to miss a single day of the Little Office of the Blessed Virgin . . . In any case, I'm there more or less at the same hour that you are . . . and some other time, God willing, I'll tell you everything in greater detail. For today, be content to know that I send my *little* sister all my great love, with everything that I am. Your brother in Jesus,

*Brother María Rafael*



## 71. to María Osorio

Oviedo, November 11, 1935

J-H-S

My dearest sister,

I left so much out the other day . . . despite my letter's length, it didn't really tell you anything at all. Truth be told, we have far too few words to express so many things, and so we aren't at all up to the task . . . Though I think words are unnecessary between us. Don't you agree?

Today or tomorrow, I expect a letter from you full of "silly and simpleminded things"<sup>572</sup> . . . If only you knew how many times I read your letter! . . . Your encouragement gives me such strength to stay the course . . . How good is the Lord! How straight are His paths! . . . It seems that He is just waiting for us to come into difficulty, in order to lend us a hand and give us aid . . . You see it that way too, don't you?

You know . . . I think the Lord heard your prayer. Your charity is not in vain . . . I am so at peace, and my restlessness has quieted down a bit . . . Or at least, I've been able to channel it . . . How are you doing? Surely you love Our Lady more now, isn't that so? I've helped you, haven't I? Tell me everything; it does me so much good.

Speaking of Mary, in your letter you told me that you'd been at her feet, and that you didn't forget to pray the *Salve*. Both are very good things . . . but amount to little. I

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<sup>572</sup> *Silly and simpleminded things*: Presumably quoting María's characterization of her own letters, as implied in Letter 70.

must scold you here. Forgive me, but we did decide that I'm not your nephew but rather your brother; in that spirit, I'll say that if you talked about the Virgin more in your letters . . . they'd be better. Please, little sister, don't take this as a lecture. When I began to love Mary, I decided not to write anything to anyone without mentioning the Virgin at least once . . . And I've since acquired the custom of first entrusting myself to Her whenever I write. Then, I always look for an opening in my ideas to mention Her for whatever reason. Then, when I finish, I give thanks to Her for everything, especially for allowing me to dare to . . . anyway, you understand.

Think of how much the Virgin loves you! . . . You'll be answerable for that before Jesus, Her divine Son. Anything done for Her amounts to little.

I allow myself to say such things to you because I promised to help you. Please don't take this as presumptuousness on my part, but rather charity toward you. Know that I just want you to love Her very much, because then God will love you more, and you will love Him more. Saint Bernard says that we receive *everything* through Mary's mediation,<sup>573</sup> and it's true.

How could we not become saints, my God, when You help us with so many souls of yours on earth, and you help us with Mary from heaven? Will we ever give You

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<sup>573</sup> "Let us honour Mary, because such is the will of God, Who would have us to obtain everything through the hands of Mary" (Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, "Sermon for the Feast of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary," in *Sermons for the Seasons and Principal Festivals of the Year*, vol. III [Westminster, Md: The Carroll Press, 1950], 288).

something in return? . . . I think so . . . We're going to try now, aren't we? You'll see, it'll be good . . . With the Most Blessed Virgin we can go anywhere . . . don't you forget it. Ask Her for this grace, and I'll ask Her to give it to you too, and you'll see that She listens to me. She loves me very much; my vocation is Hers, and I owe it to Her.

What a fool I am, my God . . . you must be laughing at me, my dearest sister, but I don't mind. I am determined that you should love Our Lady very much, because I see that as your first step toward becoming a saint . . . and since you have a long way to go, that is the quickest way to begin to love God . . . loving His Mother very much. Do you see some other way? Tell me honestly, just as I'm telling you . . . Point out my faults, or those you've observed in me; I'll do the same with you.

As we ascend, we have to be whittled down quite a bit in some ways, and grow in others, which are necessary for us to ascend the mount of perfection.<sup>574</sup> Sometimes, we can't come to know ourselves well enough on our own. If we only see perfection and virtue in others, and we tell them so, then we practice a *false charity*; at least, that's how I see it . . . And as for you and me, we are so little, so wicked and wretched; with all that God has given us, it's truly a shame that we aren't saints yet.

How is possible to live this way, my God? How is it possible to resist such grace, such consolation, and such light and clarity as You give us? We must be very wretched indeed, when in order to receive just a little love from us, You have to give us infinite love . . . What patience You have, Lord. For others, a mere fraction of what You give us

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<sup>574</sup> *Mount of perfection*: Saint John of the Cross's image of the path toward holiness (see Letter 39).

would have sufficed in order for them to surrender themselves to You entirely . . . And yet despite our resistance to Your grace, despite our resistance to Your love, You don't give up on us. You insist on continuing Your work and trying to win a bit of our love . . . How blind and bumbling we are! We are weighed down with so much muck and mire that keeps us from flying toward You!

But it's never too late, my God; what we've taken so long to give You . . . we are going to give to You now entirely. Isn't that right, Aunt María? . . . What little things we are! And yet how God loves us. We'll never know how much. In the meantime, let's do what we can. The Lord is content with so little.

Today I asked the Lord if I should write you all these things . . . and I believe He has given me to understand that if He can do something in someone's soul by means of our actions . . . we ought to be generous and offer ourselves up for the task, rather than hiding our lamp *under the bushel basket*<sup>575</sup> . . . And truly, my dear sister, the Lord has given me so much light . . . that I don't know what to do with it. If I could send it to you somehow . . . I am so content *in spite of everything!* The Lord is so good to me! . . . Aunt María, I am afraid . . . I don't know what is happening to me.

Anyway, I don't want to talk about me. What would be the point? . . . I will tell you that I am still doing well when it comes to my health . . . I take care of myself more now. My body is not my own, but God's, and if I wish to use it in His service, it must be as healthy as possible, although that is the least of my concerns. I am counting the days . . . Everything is as usual here.

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<sup>575</sup> Matt 5:15; Mark 4:21; Luke 8:16; 11:33.

Has Uncle Polín returned from Toro yet? Even if it embarrasses you, do keep me informed as to your affairs, which I consider my own. How is Pili doing?<sup>576</sup> . . . I think of you all so often, and of you in particular . . . God is so great. Consider what He permits . . . He must know why.

The gift of the holy card you sent me was a very godly gift indeed. How good you are! I don't have anything to send you back, since the *Salve* I promised you isn't ready. I don't know if you'll understand it. The holy card I sent you was no trouble at all. Fr. Vicente,<sup>577</sup> a Trappist, gave it to me when I left the monastery, so that I wouldn't forget about Our Mother. Now that I'm going back . . . perhaps you'll find it useful . . . When I was very sick, I cried at that holy card very often, remembering La Trapa . . . Nothing to be done about such weaknesses . . . God permits them, and who is without them?

I'll write you more often in the coming days, it gives me great consolation . . . That is a weakness too.

Anyway, I'll leave you now. I don't have time for anything today . . . another day I'll tell you about my life at home and what I'm up to, so that we can align our prayer schedules. That's enough for today; don't stop writing back, even if it's just a quick note. You will write back, won't you?

All my love, your brother,

*Brother María Rafael*

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<sup>576</sup> *Pili*: Rafael's cousin and María's daughter, Pilar Barón y Osorio.

<sup>577</sup> *Fr. Vicente*: Fr. Vicente Pardo Feliú, the infirmarian at San Isidro (see Letter 35).

## 72. to María Osorio

Oviedo, November 16, 1935

J-H-S

My dearest sister,

First of all, I must say that as to “taking advantage” of writing me again . . . How could you say that! . . . Truly, I forgive you, because you don’t know what you are saying. Now I’m the one who doesn’t know what to say. . . It’s very *beautiful* what’s happening to you . . . I understand you perfectly, and I praise God for it.

I received your letter this morning. I was waiting for the mail to arrive at noon so that I could then go make my visit to the Lord . . . I read it with all the charity you need not ask of me . . . And after seeing in it your soul, which is so transparent to me, I went to see God at the Handmaids’ convent.<sup>578</sup> On the one hand, I was very sad; I am human. On the other, I was very content . . . Overall, a bit overwhelmed by the *work of God* . . . I don’t know what I said to Him. I talked to Him about you, and thinking of you, I prayed, though not for very long . . . a friend of mine was waiting for me. He “doesn’t know what is happening to him,” so perhaps he has a vocation. I didn’t seek him out, but rather he

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<sup>578</sup> *Handmaids*: The Handmaids of the Sacred Heart of Jesus (Latin: *Ancillae Cordis Iesu*; Spanish: *Esclavas del Sagrado Corazón de Jesús*) were founded in Madrid in 1877 by Saint Rafaela Maria Porras y Ayllón and have an educational mission. Their building in Oviedo was ceded to the Diocese of Oviedo in 2007, and it now serves as a perpetual adoration chapel.

sought me out, and if I can do something . . . Well, God will do it, just as He does everything. We are but His instruments . . .

Later, thinking of your letter, I hardly spoke to Him . . . I knew that you were suffering . . . I saw you at the foot of the Cross on Calvary, all alone . . . on a stormy night, and the holy wood without Jesus . . . I saw you suffering. Do you remember what I drew that one night on a piece of paper when I saw you cry? . . . How good it is to be at the foot of the Lord's Cross, when He is looking at us . . . The hard thing is to stay on the Cross when Christ disappears before our eyes and the Cross remains, all dry and black and bloody . . . And neither Saint John nor the holy women nor Mary is on Calvary . . . We are all alone in darkness with the Cross. We neither know how to pray nor do we hear God, *nothing* . . . all we know is suffering . . . we look for Christ . . . and He is not there.

What does that matter to us? . . . Is that not what the Lord wants? . . . Well then! . . .

Take heart, my dear sister; Jesus is on the other side of everything that you can't see. He is looking at you, He sees you cry for Him, and your tears wash away many things. How happy you will be! Mary did nothing but look at the Lord. What merit would she have had if the Lord was there, and saw her, and spoke to her and consoled her . . . ? There's no need for any of that.

Love God without seeing Him or feeling Him, although I know how hard it is not to feel Him, especially when one truly loves Him . . . And then you *feel Him without feeling Him*. Does that make sense? You believe yourself far from Him, but that's not true . . . You tell me of His justice, how He is punishing you . . . My poor sister . . . you are far from that. It's not that you don't deserve that . . . but rather that if the Lord were to

allow His justice and punishment to fall upon us . . . who would survive?<sup>579</sup> No, there is no such punishment; His goodness toward you, on the other hand . . . Think about it, and you'll see: He loves you so! . . . He is cutting away your imperfections with the gentlest of chisels; He is *emptying* you out so that He might enter . . . don't you see? Without a doubt, this process requires tears, and many of them; but if they are His work, blessed be those tears . . .

Let Him work, suffer . . . but love Him while you suffer. Love Him dearly through the darkness, despite the storm in which the Lord has seemingly placed you, despite not being able to see Him. Love the naked wood of the Cross . . . Your tears will dry, your suffering will pass, the night will come to an end. Such joy! . . . But love never ends.<sup>580</sup> It grows and expands, and when the Lord allows a small ray of light to reach us . . . we love and thank Him for it all the more. Is that not so, my dear little sister? Haven't you noticed that? . . . When it seems your suffering is at its worst, and God reveals something of Himself . . . What happens then? . . . Then it's as though water is "boiling" inside me, even if it's just for a moment.<sup>581</sup> When the Cross returns, and it is bare once more . . . may that be blessed too!

Cry, cry as hard as you can, and suffer . . . but do so at the foot of the Cross, and love God while you suffer. Such happiness! How God loves you . . . you'll see, someday

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<sup>579</sup> Ps 130:3.

<sup>580</sup> 1 Cor 13:8.

<sup>581</sup> Quotation marks in the original.



very soon . . . What do you care about anything else? You have God's love. Even if you can't feel it, He is doing His work . . . let Him.

You also say that you're selfish to write me about your life and your sorrows . . . Didn't we come to an agreement that I am your brother? Don't worry about that. The Lord has placed me in your path, He must have done so for a reason . . . If I can be of help to you, then I will . . . It is a consolation given to me by the Lord, and a great one at that . . . No, it is not selfish to bring up your suffering to *me*. I'm nobody, I'm nothing, perhaps I'm just a stepping stone that God has placed in front of you to help you keep going. Whether you need material support or human consolation . . . so be it. That's how the Lord has arranged things. If only you knew how much I've needed, how much I still need . . . As the Lord guides us . . . not a single detail is missing.

Your confidence in me does me so much good . . . I know (and I say this before God, who is watching us) I don't deserve it. But I accept it gladly. We understand each other so well, don't we, sister? When I am back at my monastery, you'll see, I'll be able to help you so much.

It's natural that you should talk about yourself when you write me, for God is your life and God is within you. When you talk to me about Him, of course you have to tell me whether you love Him, and how, and how much . . . When you want to talk to me about Him, the same thing happens: the love that He has *for you*, how He treats you, how He spoils you. So, it's only natural that you should talk about yourself when you talk about Him . . . Moreover, and this is what really matters, when you tell me of your sorrows, it's not in order to receive any *human* consolation from me, but rather to hear me speak of God. Isn't that so? . . . So that I can relate your suffering and your joy alike

to God, and go seek Him out, and tell you, “don’t cry, sister, don’t cry. God is with you . . . Suffer silently, and in that silence, love the God you cannot see . . . the God who may be hiding, but who loves you all the same.”

There are so many things I’d say to you if only I knew how. You must be content with reading not my words, but my intentions.

I’ve just had to stop because Aunt Regina<sup>582</sup> came by, and I was the only one home. How different is her conversation from . . . Anyway, God makes us each a little different . . . But really, I wouldn’t want to see you acting like such worldly creatures . . . You ought to thank the Lord very much for the state in which you find yourself.

I’m so pleased by what you said about the Virgin Mary; there can be no doubt that She is holding you by the hand. You’ll see, you’ll come to love Her dearly so quickly. It cannot be otherwise. You’ll start to notice the effects . . . Loving Mary is so sweet. I didn’t even know what devotion to the Virgin was before . . . but in La Trapa they taught me to love Her very much, and ever since then, I’ve wanted everyone to know and revere Her . . . Don’t be surprised, then, at what I said to you in my other letter . . . Perhaps it wasn’t the right moment, and it wasn’t my intention to teach you a lesson, but you must regard what I have to say as coming from the poor Trappist that I am. After all, the life of a Cistercian monk is nothing but God and the Virgin; that is what he lives and breathes . . . So what else is he going to talk about, right?

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<sup>582</sup> *Aunt Regina*: Regina González-Tablas Otálora, who was married to Rafael’s maternal uncle, Alfonso Barón Torres.

Besides, I perceived an opening in you where love for Mary could enter in, while the world is generally so *closed off* to anything to do with God. I see so much indifference that when I come across a soul like yours, so ready and willing to become holy . . . I feel a wild urge to speak to you about God and the Virgin, and fill you up with . . . well, with what I may not even have myself. But then, that's the least of my concerns . . . If only you knew how much this consoles me . . . I would consider all my sacrifices, and even the occasional bitterness of finding myself completely alone in the world, completely worth it for having met a single soul (which I now have) for whom I can do some good in these matters. If you haven't yet experienced this consolation, you will someday, God willing.

I have such a great treasure, my dear sister . . . I should like to shout for joy and tell all of creation . . . "Bless the Lord . . . love the Lord . . . He is so good, He is so great . . . He is God." And instead, I have to keep quiet . . . quiet, always quiet; and love Him alone in silence. Do you understand? The world doesn't see, it's blind, and God needs love, so much love. I can't give Him enough, I'm small, I'm going crazy trying. I wish the world would love Him, but the world is His enemy.

Lord, what a great torture this is! I see this, but I cannot fix it . . . I am so small and insignificant. The love I have for You overwhelms me. I wish my family and friends, all of them, would love You very much, so that I could rest a little . . . But the world, which is so busy with its concerns and affairs and discussions, takes me for a madman . . .

Lord, what should I do? Love, love . . . I can't. The world spurns this treasure of mine, which is Your love. This makes me suffer, because You are suffering.

And then here you come, my dear little sister, a beggar for love . . . and you want me—of all people, me—to talk to you about God . . . It's enough to make one go crazy. How could I not talk to you? Of course I will . . . even though I have no words. I jump with joy as I see that your soul, like mine, wants nothing and yearns for nothing but love of God . . . That's when I don't know what to do or say. I can't even talk to you about the cross, or suffering, or anything at all, not about you, not about me. Love moves my pen and the paper feels too small for it. I have no words. I get so worked up, sometimes I don't even know what I'm saying, but I pour my heart out, I can't help it . . .

What does it all matter? We're so little and insignificant. We obsess over the most irrelevant details . . . Love for God!!! There is no path, no route, no peak, no valley; it all disappears; love for God floods it all. Do you know what that means? Do you understand? Forgive me, I can't resist anymore, I'm weak and wretched and unprepared . . . I don't know what I am saying. When the water boils over, I have to let it.

Forgive me, again. I don't know if the same thing happens to you. Sometimes when I talked to you in the past—remember?—I'd get worked up a bit. The same thing happens when I write, I can't help it . . . I have to stop and light a cigarette. I don't know if that's the right thing to do. As you can see, I'm completely honest with you, too . . . But with this pen, I feel completely powerless to tell you everything I'd like to, and send you what I'd like to . . . Anyway, God sees, and you don't need me to explain. But this morning, when I saw that sentence in your letter where you said it was "just for me," I saw that clearly the same thing happens to you . . . Blessed be God, that He should permit such things in creatures as wretched as we are.

What I don't know is how we can live or reflect or think or do anything useful. Either we are foolish or we are oblivious. God forgive us.

It doesn't matter to me if you lack consolation or experience dryness or if your path goes one way or the other . . . It doesn't matter to me if you are suffering or rejoicing . . . What does matter to me is that *all this*, which is *nothing*, helps you to love Jesus as He was at Gethsemane, the Jesus of Nazareth who called mourners blessed.<sup>583</sup> What matters is that you follow Him wherever He goes, and that you see only the love with which He looks at you and draws you . . . Sometimes we are in the wheatfields of Judea, listening to Him speak on a calm afternoon; sometimes we follow Him into the courts of the temple and listen to Him there, awestruck. Sometimes we are on the Mount of Olives, wanting to help Him a little, wiping away His tears of blood . . . that is true suffering . . . We poor creatures know nothing of that.

Sometimes we walk the Way of Sorrows; sometimes He is on the Cross, and we are at the Virgin's side . . .

But always with Jesus, at every moment, without giving any thought as to what we are to eat or drink or what we are to wear,<sup>584</sup> forgetting ourselves completely. Always with Him . . . Following Him quietly, without even the expectation that He will turn to look at us . . . Do we deserve that at all? . . . How good such a life is! If only you knew! Beggars for His love . . . when we follow in His footsteps with devotion, we forget about everything else, I promise you. There is nothing left on earth that could distract us.

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<sup>583</sup> Matt 5:4.

<sup>584</sup> Matt 6:25.

How sad it is to see people remain indifferent when they see Jesus and his whole retinue of disciples pass by . . . How joyful the apostles and friends of Jesus must have been each time someone saw clearly, gave up everything, joined them, and followed the man of Nazareth. All He was asking for was a little bit of love.

Shall we go follow Him, my dear sister? . . . He sees our intentions. He looks at us, smiles, and helps us . . . We have nothing to fear. Let's go be the last in that retinue roving the lands of Judea. We'll keep quiet, but we'll be nourished with an immense, enormous love for Jesus . . . He doesn't even need us to speak, or for us to get up close so He can see us, or great deeds, or anything that would call attention to ourselves . . . Yes, let's go be the last of Jesus's friends, but the ones who love Him the most.

What does it matter if we don't hear Him or see Him, if we know He is close to us *one way or the other?*

We shall accompany the Virgin, and speak to Her of Her Son. We'll tell Her how much we love Him . . . so if people don't pay Him any mind, She needn't worry, we'll give Him all the love that is lacking in the rest of humanity, and if we had to give our lives for Jesus a hundred times over, we'd do it . . . We'll give Mary so much consolation, won't we? . . . With the tenderness of children toward such a good Mother . . . And what will She say to us then? . . .

Look, once I start writing like this, I never stop. I have a whole world inside me, and it is so vast, so great, you can't even imagine . . . And yet it is so simple . . . It consists of nothing more than a very great love for Jesus and infinite tenderness for Mary. What more could I desire?

You have one too, you just don't know it. Your whole life is Jesus, although you haven't realized it yet, and that's why you are suffering . . . When you realize this . . . you'll see how good it is. Someday, I'm sure, you'll say, "How blind I was when I suffered for *my* sake rather than *His*." You'll get there, just let Him work.

There are so many things I wanted to share with you in this letter, and I don't know if I'll manage any of them. I wanted to send you consolation from God, but if there's human consolation here, take that too. Why not? . . . To me, you are my very beloved sister, to whom I owe so many things—in heaven, you'll see. The Lord used you and Uncle Polín to plant a seed in me, and it has taken a long time to grow . . . and I don't know whether it'll produce flowers or thorns, but either way, it comes from God.

If only I could repay you some of what I owe . . . I'll always remember our chats at Pedrosillo.<sup>585</sup> I'd tell you one trifle after another, and with such charity, that you'd help me to see the Lord. I learned so much from you. It's not that we are doing the opposite now, because even if you don't realize it, you are still doing me just as much good now as you did then. I never suspected that I was going to be able to pay you back. Blessed be God who permits such things.

As for me, I don't have anything new to tell you. My life just takes me from home to church, and from church back home, and always at different times, depending on my father's schedule. He takes great consolation in being with me; he doesn't even go to the cinema, or the theater, or the club . . . He and I are more spiritually united now than ever before. How great is the work of God.

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<sup>585</sup> *Pedrosillo*: María Osorio and Leopoldo Barón's former estate outside of Ávila.

The other day I went to see my former confessor. He told me that my plan was absurd,<sup>586</sup> and that God seemed to have abandoned me. Those were his words . . . So I haven't gone back to see him. What he said didn't rattle me or trouble me in the least . . . I didn't make anything of it . . . God alone is enough for me. I've gotten used to that over the past two years . . . That's what the Lord wanted of me. May His will be done.

Fernando will be coming over from Belgium,<sup>587</sup> Papá has written him about it. He wants us all together for Christmas this year.

My mother still doesn't know anything, nor will she, until the last possible moment. That's the charitable thing to do, even if she suspects it.

Leopoldo already knows too.<sup>588</sup> The other day he told me he was very happy to learn of it, because it made him sad to see me suffer, even though I didn't say anything . . . He knows it's the only place for me, and that God doesn't want me to be in the world.

That's all I can tell you. I go in and out; on some days there are embers, on others there are sparks, and then some days there's nothing at all. But I'm more at peace now. The Lord has helped me see that I don't need to do anything . . . I just rest in Him and in Mary, that's all.

I hope you give me *good* news in your next letter. But if not, I don't mind. Unburden yourself, speak of God however you wish, and honestly . . . that's what I do with you . . . If you're weak and miserable, well, who isn't? If you *don't know what to do*

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<sup>586</sup> That is, Rafael's plan to re-enter the monastery.

<sup>587</sup> Luis Fernando Arnáiz Barón, Rafael's younger brother, was studying in Belgium.

<sup>588</sup> Leopoldo Arnáiz Barón, Rafael's other younger brother.



*with yourself*, that's no surprise to me. If you suffer, that's fine. If you laugh, that's fine too. Just speak to me of Jesus and the Virgin, and you'll see, *everything shall pass*.

Don't laugh at my letter, which I'm sure is somewhat naive and doesn't tell you anything you don't already know.

You say you gobble up "trivialities" . . . Well, that's exactly what I write you. What more could you expect from me? . . . Sometimes I wonder, and I'll say, "Lord, I don't understand it, but You must know . . . I do absolutely nothing, but it's as if I am doing something. What could it be?" . . . But I don't care. I assure you that I am not lacking in humility in these matters, because I know the Lord often uses the littlest things to realize His works. I can fool you, but I can't fool God.

I feel so bad that Uncle Polín isn't with you.<sup>589</sup> Today was his name day and I didn't write him. I have no excuse. If only you knew how often I think of him. God loves him so much!

You'll say I'm getting tiresome with all this talk about loving God . . . Forgive me, I don't know how to talk about anything else.

I'll leave you now. I didn't realize, but it's two in the morning, and I need to sleep a bit so that I can get up in the morning to receive the Lord. How fortunate we are! Don't you think? We don't appreciate it enough . . . To think that tomorrow I'll be with Him and I'll be able to talk to Him about all this . . . I'll explain your situation to Him . . . I'll

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<sup>589</sup> *Uncle Polín*: María's husband, Leopoldo Barón Torres, was still in Toro on business.

As Rafael indicates, the feast of Saint Leopold is celebrated on November 15.

tell Him to do with you as He wills. Well, maybe I won't say anything at all . . . He'll do all the talking.

Tomorrow, when I get back from Communion, I'll keep writing you. Right now, I'll just pray a *Salve* and three Hail Marys, and I'll fall asleep thinking about how I'll be with the Lord in the morning, and about my sister María's little soul, which I must help to love God and the Virgin . . . Longing to see you at peace in your tribulation, and hoping that your next letter will say, "You know, dear Rafa, it's true: love for God fills me in such a way that it is no longer I who live in me."<sup>590</sup> I neither suffer nor rejoice, because loving, just loving, is enough for me . . . My dear brother, I have no other work, 'now that my every act is love.'<sup>591</sup> That's what I hope your letter will be like. Will it? . . . Meanwhile, don't worry if it isn't. You know what Saint John of the Cross says: "He who knows nothing of pain knows nothing of love."<sup>592</sup>

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<sup>590</sup> *It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me* (Gal 2:20).

<sup>591</sup> From the *Spiritual Canticle*: "I no longer tend the herd, / nor have I any other work / now that my every act is love" (John of the Cross, *Collected Works*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez [Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1991], 475).

<sup>592</sup> "He who knows nothing of pains / in this valley of sorrows / nothing knows of good things / nor has tasted of love, / since pains are the garment of lovers" (trans. Lynda Nicholson in Gerald Brenan, *St. John of the Cross: His Life and Poetry* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973], 41). Long attributed to Saint John of the Cross, the author of this short poem has recently been identified as his contemporary and fellow

My dearest sister, I've picked up my pen once more in order to continue this letter, which I don't want to go on too much longer. If I allowed myself to keep going, I'd never finish.

I've just received the Lord. I went to Mass at eight o'clock with my father . . . I was thinking of you. I don't have anything else to say. How dull, right? But look, you have to understand, words are so clumsy. You know that it's when we are quiet that we speak the most . . . How sweet the Lord is! Isn't he? How He draws us, and the way He does it.

Look, it is so good to be at the door to the Cenacle,<sup>593</sup> and to watch Him give the Bread to each of His disciples . . . and there are always a few crumbs left over for you. Isn't that right? . . . He gives them to you, and they fill you up just so . . . How good is Jesus! With a tender gaze, He commands you to draw near, tell Him everything, let Him console you . . . You see His immense love for you . . . *Everything* disappears, the disciples, even your own self . . . He fills it all . . . How good is Jesus! Then there are no more sorrows or joys, and we don't know what to say . . . we can't speak. We stay there, lost in His embrace, and then He speaks to the soul with such great gentleness . . . My dearest little sister, how good is Jesus! And He loves us so . . . I'm telling you, it's enough to make you melt . . . Does this happen to you too?

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Carmelite Pedro de San Angelo (Lucinio Ruano and Crisógono de Jesús Sacramentado, *Vida y obras de San Juan de la Cruz* [Madrid: Editorial Católica, 1974], 154).

<sup>593</sup> *Cenacle*: The "upper room" where the Last Supper took place.

Leave it to Him, and you'll see . . . I promise you, in one true Communion we'd receive enough to last us the rest of our lives, if only we knew how to make one . . . But instead, we are so wretched. What a tragedy! But let us not lose heart, even amid dryness . . . again, how good is Jesus!

Why do I speak to you like this? I don't know. I have this great tenderness . . . I want to be able to share it with you . . . I want to send you *everything* the Lord gives me so generously; I ask Him to share it for me.

I don't know how to keep going, I can't. Forgive me, little sister . . . but you understand, right? All I can say is that you were with me at the door to the Cenacle . . . and He gave you a crumb or two also, isn't that right?

What else do you want me to tell you? You aren't alone, no, it just seems that way to you. And don't you envy me for being able to have a novice master or a confessor . . . Today, I'm telling you, I don't need them and neither do you. What could creatures give us that would be better than what God gives us? Nothing . . . absolutely nothing . . .

Look, tomorrow you're going to do something . . . when you approach the altar for Communion, tell the Lord what you're going through. Tell Him just as you've told me, simply and candidly . . . Ask Him to be your confessor, your spiritual father, your dear friend, and tell Him how alone you feel, and how you need Him for everything. Tell Him all this with humility and simplicity; speak just as you are. Tell Him your suffering in great detail, not so that He will take it away from you, no . . . but rather in order to pour out your heart to Him . . . Your sorrows are His sorrows. You want to be His, so start there, by giving Him and telling Him everything . . . Tell Him that I sent you, and sit on Jesus' knees, and let your tears soak His humble tunic. You'll see, the Lord will listen

to you, I'm sure of it. Afterward, you'll be transformed, and so happy . . . and if you experience some weakness during the day, it won't matter. You'll remind the Lord about everything you offered Him that morning . . . You'll ask Him for scraps from His table.<sup>594</sup> And how could He fail to give them to you?

You'll see, my dear sister, you'll see. This will be so good for you. If it doesn't work for you, tell me, but I'm sure that your soul will be filled with such great peace . . . You'll do work around your house with holy joy . . . You'll see the Lord everywhere, finding Him among the pots and pans and even helping you make the beds . . . Nothing in your surroundings will matter to you at all. You won't suffer on account of the sorrows He sends you . . . you'll suffer because you find yourself still in exile, far from Him and from being able to enjoy Him completely. But perhaps you won't even suffer because of that, for after all, you are doing His will . . .

Will you do this tomorrow at Communion? . . . You don't need any preparation, or prayers, or anything like that. He is waiting for you, and He already knows what you're like. He wants you to ask Him for this.

If you don't see Him, don't worry. He is listening to you either way. I'll unite myself to you at the holy altar on the 18<sup>th</sup>, because today is the 16<sup>th</sup>, and this letter will get to you tomorrow, which is the 17<sup>th</sup>.<sup>595</sup>

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<sup>594</sup> Matt 15:27.

<sup>595</sup> Rafael mixes up the dates. He finished the letter on November 17, not November 16 (OC 477).

You'll see how well things will go with you and the Lord. I am praying to His Most Holy Mother for this. Perhaps you've already done this, and I'm just talking nonsense over here, but that's all I can do.

The way I see it, your spiritual problems are simple enough to be resolved by simplicity . . . That's how I resolve mine. But neither of us is complicated. Essentially, we are like children, and very little ones at that. But I think we are very spoiled, and we misbehave quite a bit . . . Well, may it all serve God and the Virgin.

Now I'm going to get the car out, because after we eat, I have to give my father a ride to Infiesto. Afterwards, I'll take this letter to the post office, and then I'll go see our Friend Jesus.

So, I'll leave it there for today. Don't stop writing this poor brother of yours, telling him every last one of your "trivialities." Don't doubt that if I could relieve you of a few splinters of your cross, even at the expense of what I love most, I would do it. For now, I settle for being able to send you this tiny ray of light, however dim, to scatter your darkness, and a few sparks of love for God, too.

All my love and affection, your beloved brother,

*Brother María*

*Rafael*

*O.C.R.*

Don't you worry about your punctuation. I understand you perfectly . . . that's not important at all. I don't know how this letter went either; whether it's well written or not, the Virgin dictated it to me.

## 73. to María Osorio

Oviedo, November 18, 1935

J-H-S

My dearest sister in the Lord,

Making the most of the silence in the house, since everyone else has gone to bed, I've decided to begin this response to your letter of November 17. I'm surprised that you didn't get my letter. I wrote you a very long letter, nine pages front and back . . . I guess you'll get it today. Anyway, I did receive yours and answered it in the one I just mentioned. If it is not in your possession, do go and claim it.

What do you want me to say, dear little sister? Your situation pains me greatly, as does that of Uncle Polín.<sup>596</sup> Of course I see God's *benevolent* hand in everything . . . but it's as you said, we are so human and so insignificant that we always think we are on the edge of ruin. May Mary never permit it!

I offered Holy Communion for you today. I'll do the same tomorrow. I don't know how to ask the Lord for anything, but He understands me. Believe me when I say that I asked Him to take your suffering from you and give it to me, or at the very least, that He split it between us . . . Poor and miserable man that I am, will I be able to do you this service? . . . It is harder to see a loved one suffer and not be able to do anything about it than it is to suffer oneself.

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<sup>596</sup> *Uncle Polín*: María's husband, Leopoldo Barón Torres.

You want me to talk about myself the way you do . . . What do you want me to say about myself? Leave me be, don't worry about it. Intercede for what you can, and as best you can. It's enough for me to know that you are helping me that way. I wouldn't know how to describe my interior life to you . . . with everything that happens to me, I don't know how to do anything but thank the Lord and love Him more and more every day . . . Seeing you suffer, and not knowing how to fix it, and realizing I am powerless to do so . . . it's a thorn in my side. On the other hand, I do envy your way of seeing things . . . and the great love with which you carry the Lord's cross . . .

"Help me, brother!" These cries echo in your letters, and when they reach me, they leave me in such a state that only God understands . . . I turn to Him and I ask Him, "But how, Lord? What can I do? What should I say to my sister, whom I love so much, when she asks me for help in carrying her cross? . . . If only I could help . . . but I cannot."

I wish I were big and strong so I could lift you up and help you and encourage you . . . so I could be your big brother, and you could lean on me like the little child you say you are, and I could help you with everything . . . Poor man that I am, I want nothing more than to be to you what you've asked me to be . . . But I am so weak and small! . . . I say all this to the Lord . . . and it seems that He consoles me . . . It's such a paradox, that creatures should place their trust in me! No matter. I trust in God . . .

Pay me no mind, these are just things that came to mind . . . I'm a bit fired up. I may be small, but with the Lord on my side, I am strong.

Count on my help and consider me your older brother; don't be afraid. My prayers are weak, but maybe they can do a lot . . . Your faith can do anything.



I've just thought of something very similar, although completely different, which is what happened with Merceditas<sup>597</sup> when she was so sick. The poor girl was in such a state, it was painful to see . . . Her eyes were protruding and they stared and stared at me . . . She could not have suffered any worse from the pain. She was twisting and turning in her mother's arms, and without being able to speak, her eyes begged me for help, they begged me to pray to the Virgin to put an end to the suffering that was making her cry out and lose consciousness. Oh, how my poor sister suffered!! . . . In those moments, I saw that she was dying, that she was slipping away . . . And she looked at me in such a way . . . if you could have seen her . . . it was as if she was saying, "But Rafael, what are you doing? Aren't you going to pray to the Virgin for me?" . . . So then I ran like crazy to the Tabernacle, and offered *my sister's prayer* to the Virgin, since my own was worthless . . . I felt so ashamed! Am I making sense?

I asked the Lord to send me all that pain . . . that He'd make me suffer, and let my sister rest, either in this life or the next . . . Watching someone suffer is terrible. I find it harder to watch someone suffer than to suffer myself . . . But the Lord knows what He is doing.

Now it's not Merceditas who is looking at me in anguish and trusting in my prayers to the Virgin . . . It's another beloved sister of mine, who is suffering in a very different way . . . she embraces the cross and, weeping, awaits assistance, putting her trust in me . . . It's terrible, what you're asking me. You don't know what I am . . . but it

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<sup>597</sup> *Merceditas*: Rafael's younger sister, Mercedes Arnáiz Barón (see Letter 77 for her illness).

doesn't matter. Just as I did back then, as I'll never forget, I also place this sister's prayers at the feet of the Virgin . . . I'll tell Her of your sorrows, but I'll hide myself away, I'll conceal myself, because what can I do? Am I making sense?

I don't know if you'll approve of all this, but I can't help but tell you about it. I take the confidence you have in this poor creature—who doesn't deserve anything, let alone your confidence—and I turn it over to the Virgin . . . She is watching over us . . . and She is smiling, I am sure of it. But at the same time, you give me so much consolation that I always await your letters eagerly; I wait for the mail every day too. Is that a weakness? I don't know. If it is, God permits it. And if you experience the same thing, and if my letters bring you consolation too, then bless them for it. Don't you agree?

*Love one another as I have loved you.*<sup>598</sup> What a great consolation it is to know that we are loved by Christ and in Christ, especially when we are in desolation, and the Lord gives us a sign of His love . . . and in your case, the sign is clear.

How great God is, little sister! In me, the Lord has given you a brother; and in you, He has given me a soul to help, so that I can practice the charity that Jesus taught us . . . If only you knew how pleased I am to do so! If only you knew *everything* that I put into my letters! . . . I think you do know, because if you didn't, they'd be of no use to you at all . . . I put all the love I have for you in these letters . . . but I also put lots of love for God in them. He guides my pen, and I wouldn't be able to write without Him . . .

It's not my words or ideas or affection that I want to reach your soul, nor anything else that belongs to me . . . I want to nourish your poor heart, so hungry for God, with the

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<sup>598</sup> John 13:34; 15:17; 1 John 3:11.

God who stirs me, who makes me tremble. I want the consolation of God and the Virgin to reach you in my letters . . . To be able to share with you the intense peace of Jesus of Nazareth that so fills me. Do I manage to do any of this? I think so. If not, it's a waste of time. Answer me about this specifically.

I imagine I don't need to tell you to read me charitably, and to keep all this to yourself, because you're the only one I'm writing it for . . . Believe me, I hardly recognize myself; I've never written to anybody this much. You know I've always been a lazy writer.

I don't think this moment is definitive for your interior life, as you said in your letter, because I am sure that you have a greater devotion to the Most Blessed Virgin now, and She will help you in your "little agony." Love for the Virgin is capable of so much, if only you knew! . . . When I was in mine—well, I don't know if it was like yours. When I was going through, let's say, a difficult time after leaving La Trapa . . . when I thought that the world had crushed me, and I had been defeated, and I thought I was not going to be able to resist it, and I even thought I was condemned . . . I don't know, anyway, when I underwent my own "little agony," I turned to the Virgin of La Trapa. It was in that Virgin in whom I'd rest when I went to bed in the monastery's uncomfortable dormitory, exhausted from the day . . . I remembered that She still loved me, and was still listening to me in my tribulation . . . If only you knew, that was the only consolation I've had in the nearly two years I've been like this . . . my Virgin of La Trapa . . . How many times, when nobody could see me, I'd talk to Her about my plans, my desires . . . I'd talk to Her about Her Son, Jesus . . . What a great consolation it is to have the Virgin!

And you won't lack for that consolation . . . and forgive me if what I'm saying sounds childish or sentimental to you, and if you think this is a bad idea, don't do it . . . but what I like to do is talk to the Virgin out loud, as if She were at my side. Now that you spend a lot of time alone, when nobody can hear you, talk to the Virgin about your situation . . . You'll see, She'll listen . . . You know when I do it? When I'm in the car, driving alone . . . For charity's sake, don't laugh, but I've given Our Lady many an earful . . . and I think She listens to me.

Anyway . . . I'm talking such nonsense, but since you did say I should trust you and pour my heart out to you . . . and since you know and understand me by now, I don't mind.

I'm going to leave it there until tomorrow because it's getting late . . . I won't forget about communion.

Today, November 19, I'm continuing this letter that was interrupted last night. I've just received the Lord. Oh, if only you'd seen me, I kept my feet very much on the ground today; I had so many things to tell Him . . . Just those little things that fill this life of ours . . . but there, walking in the midst of all those little things, is the Lord . . . I left church so content. I believe that He will hear us. Don't you?

Don't you worry, little sister. Jesus is so good! I told Him so many things . . . I told Him that I can't do anything . . . and He gave me to understand that I shouldn't worry, that He doesn't want anything from me except love, companionship, and prayer, that with Her I can do anything, and that I should trust in Him . . . because He will do it all . . . How good is Jesus! I left church content because even in the midst of my weaknesses, the Lord does not abandon me. How can I repay Him? . . .

Well, I don't want to go on like this, because you already know where I'd end up and how, and in all my letters I say the exactly same thing in exactly the same way . . . Forgive me, but you understand me by now.

It's true, your situation is difficult . . . But have faith and believe . . . When you leave things to the Lord, He doesn't do them halfway. He either brings everything to an end quickly, or He resolves things . . . What does it matter, if it is what He wills? Didn't you say that you love Him very much? . . . Don't you grasp the crucifix in your sleep? . . . Don't you know that He is looking at you from the Cross, and *your agony alleviates His*? So, then, if you truly love Him, if you love Him with all your soul, then what is your agony to *you* if it allows you to serve the Lord *better than ever before*? . . . Have you ever thought about that?

Take courage, my dear sister. Do not desire that your suffering be alleviated, but don't desire that it be increased, either. Desire nothing.

Easier said than done, right?! . . . But if we want to be saints, that's exactly what we have to do. From your letters, I can see that you are determined to do whatever it takes. It consoles me so much to see you in such a frame of mind . . . You'll see, with Mary's help we can go wherever God wants to take us, even if we have to shed tears of blood, like Jesus did in the garden.

You say that your prayer is nothing more than an immersion in your own humility, and that humility is what you are praying for . . . What more could you want in prayer? Be calm, and realize that *you* cannot do anything else, and in that *littleness* in which you find yourself is a great love for God. Could there be any doubt of that?

There are so many things I'd say if I were sitting next to you . . . I'm so clumsy in writing!

Did you make your communion the way I told you to in my letter? How did it go? . . . Write me at great length about it, even if it takes you a few days. Don't worry about the wording.

After reading your letters a few times, I use a red pencil to mark out the parts I think I can reply to. I don't know if what I have to say will be exactly right or if it's appropriate, just that the Holy Spirit is guiding me. As you know, I'm also all alone and without spiritual direction, but I share what little experience I have of myself with you, plainly and simply. As such, just keep whatever you find useful. Everything else is just the rambling of someone madly in love with God, who doesn't always know what he's talking about . . . and just tells you everything he thinks.

One of these days I'm going to go to Covadonga<sup>599</sup> and offer a special prayer to the Virgin, that She might guide you, and Uncle Polín over in Toro; I've noticed he needs it . . . I can't do anything else. If it was up to me, I assure you . . . Well, I won't assure you of what you already know.

I'm sending you a few stamps because I think the next letter you write me will be too heavy.

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<sup>599</sup> *Covadonga*: the Holy Cave of Our Lady of Covadonga is the site of a Marian apparition and shrine in Covadonga, Asturias.

I'll leave it there for today. I'll write you at greater length another day . . . I should have so much to tell you, but nothing's coming to mind at the moment, I'm a bit out of it. My poor little sister! I'm of such little use to you! The truth is, I'm completely useless.

Did you receive the little "sparks" I sent you the other day? I won't stop sending them, as many as I can. That's why I write you, and as long as I remain in the world (physically at least), I'll keep writing you, if you find it useful. Keep it up on your part, too. I know you will.

To sum it up, my dear little sister: take heart and love God . . . love God so much . . . love God alone, and stay under the Virgin's mantle . . . and then, come whatever storms and squalls that may. Come whatever God wills.

All my affection, your *older brother*,

*Brother María Rafael*

*O.C.R.*

Ever since I was readmitted into La Trapa, I sign my name with the "Brother María" attached; it is a huge consolation to me. How great God is! Right, sister?

**74. to Leopoldo Barón**

Oviedo, November 22, 1935

Feast of Saint Lucy<sup>600</sup>

J-H-S

My dearest brother in the Lord, Uncle Polín,

I don't know what you'll think of my silence, but I've been thinking of you so much throughout this difficult time of yours . . . and I knew what you were going through and how you were suffering . . . What could this poor man possibly say to you? Nothing. I just kept quiet, and without the comfort of being able to tell you so, I prayed very much to the Virgin for you and your situation. Now, things are different. I know that you've leased the estate, so at least there's light at the end of the tunnel. I'm sure that you can rest now. How good God is! Isn't He?

Now I can write you again, and praise the Lord with you, as I am sure you already are . . . I have been. If only you knew how happy I am that things are looking up for you. Your affairs are my own; I can't help it.

It pained me greatly to leave Ávila. Not on my own account, as God well knows . . . but on account of leaving Aunt María all alone in your absence. I'm telling you, it was such a hard moment. I write her very often now, because apparently, she says that my

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<sup>600</sup> November 22 is the feast of Saint Cecilia, not Saint Lucy. Both saints are third-century virgin martyrs from Sicily.



letters do her quite a lot of good . . . What else can I do, right? . . . She has been so good to me, and I need her help, too!

I imagine that Aunt María will already have told you that I've obtained my father's permission . . . If I started telling you the details, I'd never stop. My father is so good, and he loves me so much! If only you knew!

I'll go to La Trapa after Christmas; he'll come with me, and will speak with my good Father Abbot in person. My father thought it was all very reasonable and very fair, and he has seen God at work in *all* of it . . . When I told him, the first thing he said in reply was that he had made a complete surrender to God . . . That as for the sacrifice he had made in surrendering me to God, he was happy to make it again, because he only wanted one thing . . . for me to become very holy, so that I could make him holy . . . That for his part, he'd help me with everything, because he only wanted me to be happy, and he could clearly see that I did not belong in the world . . . And that not only was he not sorrowful or upset about it, but he was incredibly joyful and utterly grateful to God: both because the Lord had called me so insistently, and because he could see that my vocation is so sure.

In short, he said so many things that I didn't know what to do but throw myself at the feet of the Virgin and give thanks . . . and I wanted to respond to God with so much love . . . I thought I was going crazy.<sup>601</sup>

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<sup>601</sup> Rafael summarized his conversation with his father in similar terms in a letter to María Osorio (Letter 70).

Mamá doesn't know anything . . . she suspects, but in the meantime . . . she's happy.

I could've left already, and I'd be there by now if I had, but my father's generosity and his truly *holy* (it's not enough to say *Christian*) conduct have won me over. When I asked him what he thought about me spending this last Christmas at home, his face lit up, and he was clearly very pleased. Did I do the right thing? I don't know. But if I can put those around me at ease, make them happy, cheer them up, and bring them closer to God, even if it were at the cost of shedding my own blood . . . trust me, I'm not afraid of making sacrifices. What do I care? I have God so deep inside me . . . so deep, I can tell. I wonder at it, and I don't know what to do, except love Him dearly, so dearly. Uncle Polín, you don't even know. I don't know how to do anything else!

I don't know when I'll see you next, because Mamá and her little girl are thinking of going to Ávila . . . and Papá has promised that he won't ask me to accompany them, because I want to go to Venta de Baños directly from Oviedo<sup>602</sup> . . . That seems only natural, right? . . . It would be really hard for me otherwise, and I think it would be unnecessary . . . If only I didn't love you all so much! You don't even know . . . And if only I were *strong*, but I am so weak!

For now, I'm satisfied just to be able to write, and to be writing you . . . If only you knew how much consolation it brings me . . . And then . . . nothing; I want to live the

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<sup>602</sup> Despite what Rafael says here (see also Letter 70), he did end up accompanying his mother Mercedes and his sister Merceditas to Ávila to see Leopoldo and María one more time before re-entering the monastery (OC 414).

hidden, humble life of my Trapa, where, forgotten by men, I can surrender myself to God completely . . . Now that I'm surrendering for good, don't you think twice about your nephew . . . just pray for him. The more the Lord cuddles me, the more help I need in order to respond to His grace . . . Sometimes I feel so alone and so small . . . What can I do, Lord? I wish I could sink away and disappear.

Forgive me, brother, for telling you all this . . . but God is my life, and I don't know how to talk about anything else . . . When I thought about writing you, I didn't dare; I wouldn't have known what to say . . . because I understand you perfectly, and I knew that I couldn't alleviate your suffering. From far away, I was praying for you. Now that the storm is going to pass, as I said, I'm willing to tell you how things are with me. Though I won't tell you about my sorrows or my joys . . . because I have neither one nor the other. I don't know if I'm making sense. I have God . . . I don't know how to explain. May your charity make up for that.

There's no need for you to write me, because even without you reminding me, I know just how connected to my life you are . . . Someday you'll know it too.

I wish you were already back in Ávila with Aunt María.<sup>603</sup> She has been suffering a great deal too . . . and believe me, it's not that I want to see your cross taken from you, because it is the *one* treasure you both have. But from time to time, I do pray to God and to His Blessed Mother, and I ask that my little sacrifices, and the one the Lord is preparing for me right now most of all, be of use . . . in some way. That's all I can do, but I do it gladly. The Lord and the Virgin help me. Knowing that from my corner of La

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<sup>603</sup> Leopoldo was on business in Toro at the time.

Trapa, without anybody even realizing, I can even sanctify my father—that is enough for me.

I'm counting the days . . . I can't tell you anything else. I want to tell you so many things, but I don't know . . . *You don't need me to*, right?

Give my grandmother and Aunt María a million hugs for me . . . Don't forget little Ropi either.<sup>604</sup> All my great affection, your brother,

*Brother María Rafael*

*O.C.R.*

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<sup>604</sup> Rafael's grandmother, Fernanda Torres Erro; aunt, María Josefa Barón Torres; and friend, Rosa "Ropi" Calvo, all lived in Toro.

## 75. to María Osorio

Oviedo, November 22, 1935

Feast of Saint Lucy<sup>605</sup>

J-H-S

My dearest sister,

Today, November 22, at eight-thirty at night, I am sitting down to respond to your letter, for which I don't know how to thank you. Before I went to the house of the Lord, I wrote to Uncle Polín in Toro; I suppose he'll still be there when my letter arrives . . . Now, after spending some time with Our Lady, I've come back home . . . Nobody is around; I have silence, and I have your letter before me; so, commending myself to the Virgin, I ask you to lend me your ears.

First of all, I'll say that tomorrow, which is Saturday, I shall indeed offer Communion for your intentions, and I'll ask the Lord to give you light . . . or I won't ask Him anything at all, for as you know . . . There's no need. Perhaps you, *as far as I can tell*, won't need to say much to Him either . . . you'll see. It's just a matter of uniting ourselves to the Lord, so that whatever one fails to do, the other will make up for. Are we agreed? . . . Tomorrow, when I return from Communion, I'll tell you what I ended up telling Him.

You said you don't know how to repay me . . . Repay me? You don't owe me anything, but you do owe Jesus.

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<sup>605</sup> November 22 is the feast of Saint Cecilia, not Saint Lucy (see Letter 74).

You say that Jesus is behind me . . . Of course He is, and in front of me, and on all sides . . . and if you pay a little attention, you'll see Him in every creature, and all over the place too . . . and you shall be in Him, and He in you . . . Do you remember what I said about the sea? . . . Just today I was in Gijón,<sup>606</sup> and looking out at that great big sea . . . I thought of God . . . and then I thought: How tiny the sea is! . . . The sea has limits, a surface, a depth, but God doesn't . . . God is limitless, and when we truly immerse ourselves in Him . . . then we don't see anything, we see Him in all things, it's all Him . . . How great He is! Isn't He?

You say that Jesus is behind me . . . yes, indeed He is, little sister. He is within me . . . but He is also within you. You seek Him, don't you? Don't you see Him? Don't be afraid of falling. There's nothing we can't endure. Don't you go thinking that it's all over when one of those moments comes . . . No, that's what we think, and that's what we'd *like* . . . but no, it's just not true. We must drink the whole chalice and *not stop*, whether to taste its bitterness or to enjoy its sweetness<sup>607</sup> . . . We can endure anything; don't you see that it's the Lord who does it all? . . .

Forgive me for always saying the same thing in all my letters . . . But there's nothing to do . . . Poor birds! All they know how to do is chirp, and chirp the same thing over and over again!

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<sup>606</sup> *Gijón*: A port city north of Oviedo that Rafael often visited; see Letter 40.

<sup>607</sup> Matt 26:27.

Of course, it's only natural that you should say, like David, "How long, O Lord?"<sup>608</sup> . . . Well, as long as He wants. But it's terrible to live like that, isn't it? To be so far away . . . when the Lord could lift us up instantly with a single look, and put an end to this life that is one continuous sigh for His love . . . This life in which there is no rest when thinking of Him . . . The heart trembles and shakes and remains restless; either the Lord must seize it once and for all, or He must widen it so that it can survive . . .

Living this way . . . it's so awful, isn't it? But at the same time, how sweet it is to find your heart all torn to pieces by love of God. In our more selfish moments, we exclaim, "How long, O Lord?" We want to stop suffering; we want to love *fully* and *at once*; we want to be free of our bodies and fly toward God . . . We don't know what we are saying, and in our madness, we let out these cries of love for God . . . in such a state, that if it weren't for God sustaining us . . . by our nature we could not survive. When we feel that urge, that desire to fly forth from our own souls, when we see how small our hearts are and realize that we can't take everything the Lord is giving us . . . that's when we feel that "how long, O Lord?" that you put in your letter. If our love is *pure*, it will pass. But that *pure love* is so difficult to come by! We muddle it with so much selfishness! . . . That cry is much more about us than it is about God.

I don't know if I'm making sense; I'm expressing myself so poorly. But when we essentially have so much love for God that we can't take it anymore, that's when we won't even need to ask the Lord to take us away . . . He'll take us without our needing to say anything. Meanwhile, in such moments of discouragement, as we realize how

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<sup>608</sup> Ps 12:1-2.

wretched we are . . . as we look at our souls, which yearn to belong to God but are weighed down with worldly burdens . . . as we see our hearts suffering from love for God, and sometimes from love for creatures too . . . and as we find ourselves still trapped in these bodies and in this life, of course it is only natural that we should shout with our entire soul, *How long, O Lord, will You hide Your face from me?*<sup>609</sup>

But then, later, serenity comes . . . peace . . . the intense peace of Christ, in which we see that as long as God keeps us here . . . I don't know exactly, but it means that He still wants something more from us . . . Our mission is not yet complete; we still have to wait, and wait with faith, patience, and above all, joy. Yes, with true joy. That is what He wants.

Listen, sometimes I feel a holy *joie de vivre* . . . And you know why? Because I live for God and in God. When I feel sorrow, it is because I have offended Him or failed to return His love; so then, realizing my own misery, I do want the Lord to take me away.

Anyway, I think one day we talked about this, and we came to this conclusion: in the ebb and flow between soul and body, and between body and soul, sometimes we wish for a thousand deaths, while other times we wish for a thousand lives, if only to use them to make some reparation for offenses against God and to make creatures love Him.

Anyway, you know what I mean . . . But let's allow the Lord to do what He wants with us. Let's not ask Him for anything at all . . . let's just keep chirping like those little birds, and keep loving God very much . . . Are we still here on earth? Well then, let's do so here on earth.

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<sup>609</sup> Ps 13:1.



It's one thing to love life, and it's another to *conform in a holy way* to the life given to us by the Lord for His service. Don't you think?

You're very right to say that the one who has begun to give is, indeed, the one who has begun to love. I can't add anything to that; I wouldn't know how to put it into words . . .

You talk of starting heaven early, and wanting the world to be on fire. Listen, I'd rather not discuss this subject. You know me by now, I'd just talk nonsense. I'll keep quiet. Have pity on this poor man who, I assure you, suffers greatly because of this. Do you understand?

My soul is a burning volcano about to erupt. I can't go on like this, Lord, I can't . . . I have this urge to lock myself away in the monastery, so that among men's silence, I can let God hear this clamor I carry around inside me, these cries that *won't stop coming out* . . . Have mercy, sister. You say that my letters are on fire, but I assure you, on the inside, I . . . Oh, the Lord is too great for a soul as small as mine.

I don't know if I'm doing the right thing in sharing all this with you . . . Destroy my letters. I start out slowly, but I end up not even realizing what I'm saying . . . But I suffer greatly, above all because I can't quite manage to break through.<sup>610</sup> Am I making sense?

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<sup>610</sup> In the original, here Rafael uses the same verb (*romper*, to break or tear) that Saint John of the Cross uses to describe the mystical encounter between God and the soul: "if it be your will, / tear through the veil of this sweet encounter" (*acaba ya si quieres, /*

I want to give so much to the Lord, but I can't do anything. He fills me and fills me, I can tell, it's perfectly clear.

I want to go beyond myself . . . but something is holding me back, something is restraining me, I don't know what is happening to me. Sometimes I want to cry, I'm so weak! But the Lord gives me such special treatment . . . I can only rest at night, clutching my crucifix, when I fall asleep thinking of Him . . . at the foot of the Cross, not knowing what to do . . .

Forgive me for pouring my heart out like this, but I want to love Him so much . . . I want to come undone . . . I don't know . . . Thinking of God puts me in a daze.

My family is here now, so I have to calm down, and talk and eat and chat with somebody or other . . . So yes, I do say, "how long, O Lord?" . . . But I assure you, the hope of soon finding myself at the foot of the Tabernacle and under Mary's mantle forever . . . that gives me the strength to get through anything. The thought of the silence that awaits me, and the concert that my Jesus and I are going to put on in La Trapa, is enough to make me forget so many other things . . . How good is Jesus, my dear sister! How He loves me! What can poor little me do?

Right now it's midnight. We had dinner and prayed the Holy Rosary, then I listened to the radio for a bit and finished my Little Office of the Blessed Virgin. With Her help, I'll continue writing.

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*¡rompe la tela de este dulce encuentro!*). See John of the Cross, *Collected Works*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1991), 639.

My dear sister, I so wish that the opening I'd hoped to fill with love for God would grow wider.<sup>611</sup> It would be bad if I couldn't do it . . . But I'm nothing. God will do it, have no doubt. But look, careful what you wish for . . . because in another letter, you told me that you could only chew a little at a time . . . Don't let what happened to me happen to you: I can only chew a little bit too, and when the Lord bites off too much for me . . . anyway.

Well, let's leave ourselves in His hands. I'm sending you what you asked for, and I do so sincerely; do make good use of it. When I pour out my heart to you, I am entrusting to you a treasure of mine and placing it in your hands, and that treasure is love for God. Perhaps you alone understand it, and you are the only person in the world to whom I speak this way . . . and I do so because I see that it might do you some good . . . But my love for God has always been hidden from the eyes of others. It's just that people in general don't understand all this. Besides, this intense inner life I have with God shouldn't be marred by the spotlight . . . But it's different for you. You love God just as I do; you share that longing and zeal that won't let you alone. We have come to understand one another very well, and we've seen *God at work* in one another . . . We've praised Him for everything together, haven't we? . . . So, then, I'll also tell you this: place the confidence I have with you at the feet of the Virgin. Will you do this?

I won't ask the Lord to relieve you of *anything* . . . I'll ask the Lord to make you able to respond to Him with absolute generosity; I'm sure you will be.

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<sup>611</sup> See Letter 72: "I perceived an opening in you where love for Mary could enter in . . ."

My dear sister, you are no bother at all when you ask me for help. God's the bother . . . because I don't understand why He has chosen me to be able to help you . . . But have no fear, that's nothing more than temptations to humility talking, and I'm already on the other side of them. I assure you, from the bottom of my heart, that I am at peace in this regard, very much so. I do whatever God inspires in me, and when I realized that I am indeed sending you some measure of peace and love for the Lord . . . how could I not be at peace about it? Or rather, pleased to serve as a conduit or a bridge. (Remember that?) How good is the Lord, my dear little sister! How good it would be to find many other souls like yours and hear them say the very same thing.

Tonight, from Friday to Saturday, I'll do a Holy Hour with you. Since I'm afraid I won't wake up at two o'clock, because it's already getting very late, what I'll do is just not go to bed.

My whole family is already in bed, and I'm the only one up. Soon my brother Trappists will get up too, in order to praise the Lord. They help me so much. Tomorrow, Saturday, over there in La Trapa, so many prayers will rise up to God on my behalf . . . Truly, this is a consolation that the world does not understand . . .

This matter of loving one's neighbor for God's sake and out of charity . . . it fills the heart with such consolation . . . But the children of this world have their amusements, such different pleasures, and they cannot understand this . . . What a pity! . . . What a dull life they lead, where everything is external, everything is superficial . . . they settle for so little.

Don't be discouraged that your love for the Virgin is "unformed" at the moment, as you said. You'll see, that dryness will pass, and you won't be able to do anything without Our Mother at your side . . . It's all a matter of waiting, and waiting faithfully.

The same thing happens to me: when I take up my pen to write you, I can't put it back down . . . There's so much I wish to tell you. The worst thing is when sometimes I can't think of anything to say at all, and so I end up writing these hilarious letters in fits and starts, and sometimes I just write awkwardly, putting down whatever comes to mind . . . But time flies, and I fill page after page. It's almost meditative for me, because talking about God and His works among His creatures is the only thing in this life that holds any interest for me. If I'm not going to talk about Him, I'd rather stay silent. You are kind enough to listen to me, so I direct it all at you; I don't do anything halfway.

Tonight in prayer, I am going to meditate on the words of Saint John of the Cross: "Now I occupy my soul" . . . Honestly, with that alone, I have enough to consider for many days, because I have been doing so for many days already. When I place myself before the Lord, I feel such great consolation in pondering that verse, and I still have not come to understand it completely . . . but no matter, for I have no other work, "now that my every act is love"<sup>612</sup> . . . Oh, if only that were true! . . . But the day will come when I live solely on love for God, it will come.

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<sup>612</sup> From stanza 28 of the *Spiritual Canticle*: "Now I occupy my soul / and all my energy in his service; / I no longer tend the herd, / nor have I any other work / now that my every act is love" (John of the Cross, *Collected Works*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez [Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1991], 475).

I've been thinking of Anita<sup>613</sup> a lot these days, I don't know why. Have you heard anything about her?

Right now it's one o'clock; at one-thirty, I'm going to stop writing, because if I wait until two, it'll be really hard for me to get up tomorrow. All we can do is struggle against these bodies of ours, so replete with weakness . . . I do take care of myself a bit now, but not very much.

I'm so sorry that Uncle Polín isn't quite doing well . . . But then, nothing to be done about that. As I've said, I did write to him this afternoon, and I imagine he'll receive the letter in Toro.

My father hasn't known what to do with himself around me these past few days. May God repay him. He understands that I am in an internal struggle, and even though I don't reveal anything that's going on inside me, sometimes I do have to make an effort not to . . . I'm so weak, my dear sister! I have no endurance whatsoever. And what's more, I've become extraordinarily sensitive . . . if only you could see me with your letters. The first thing I do, after reading them over once, is run straight to the Tabernacle. There, I tell the Lord everything you tell me . . . I ask Him for the strength for it all, and I have to cling to Him through it all . . . From time to time, I have my own agonies too, but they're very short. I hardly have time to stop to think about them, because that would be to stop to think about myself . . . Today, when I was with the Virgin, I left church so content . . . She is so good! Truly, I don't know what to do with myself.

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<sup>613</sup> Anita Solana, a friend of Rafael's (see Letter 37).

I am counting the days . . . and time is getting slower and slower on me . . . But at other times it goes so fast, I don't know . . . In the days ahead, I'll need your help so much. Didn't you tell me to ask you for it when I needed it? . . . I'll keep you informed of the steps I'm taking toward the Monastery. But I still have, or rather, the Lord still has, a lot of rough edges to smooth out . . . And I am waiting for the cross. I don't know what it'll be like, but I am waiting for it . . . May the Lord send me whatever He pleases . . . There's nothing to do but let Him work.

I'll leave it there for now. I'll continue my letter tomorrow, after I come back from receiving the Lord.

Today, November 23, I continue.

I went to bed at two-thirty last night and got up at eight-fifteen this morning; I'm a bit sleepy.

I can't think of anything to say, even though I have so much inside me . . . At communion, I united myself to your intention, just as you said to do. All I can say is that Jesus is very good to me . . . As usual.

I want this letter to go out today, but I don't know when it will arrive, because I heard that the Pajares Pass<sup>614</sup> is closed so the trains aren't running.

Forgive me, I'm so boring today. I don't know what's going on with me . . . But sometimes I'm in such a state that I can't converse or think or do anything at all . . . And the same thing happens to me in prayer . . . As you can see, sometimes the volcano

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<sup>614</sup> *Pajares Pass*: A pass in the Cantabrian Mountains that links Rafael's home province of Asturias with the rest of mainland Spain.

appears dormant and makes no noise at all . . . so from a *human* perspective, it's as if I am somewhat at rest. I don't know if I'm making sense. Anyway, I'm so sorry that I don't know how to express myself.

Tomorrow at noon I'm going to make my visit to the Lord, so that, in His presence and without knowing what to say to Him, I can have recourse to those words of Saint John of the Cross and tell Him, Lord, "I no longer tend the herd, nor have I any other work . . ." Lord, You are everything to me. I seek neither myself nor creatures . . . You are everything, Lord. I can no longer do anything, I can't think or speak, "now that my every act is love . . ." Oh, Lord! You are so great, and You love me so much. You offer me so much consolation, and I make such poor use of it.

Listen, my dear sister. Yesterday, when I arrived at church, the sermon wasn't over yet. It was a Jesuit priest, whom I know very well, and he said a few things that left me a bit . . . I don't know exactly . . . He was talking about the active life, and the consolation of being an apostle, and being able to someday present oneself before the Lord alongside all the souls one had helped. He said something about selfish souls who only care about their own holiness, and who hide themselves away from others' sight in order not to be bothered . . . He said a lot of things, and it made me think . . . I don't like what he said. I don't know why, but I was a bit perturbed.



This is the same priest who told me that God had abandoned me, after he'd asked me if I was going to come back to Los Luises and catechesis, and I told him *absolutely not*.<sup>615</sup>

But, Lord, if I just can't . . . If I get distracted around other people . . . and thus I lose out on being with God . . . If all I want to do is love . . . why won't they just let me? . . . Am I doing something wrong? . . . According to this priest, yes. According to him, only those who keep busy like Martha give glory to God.<sup>616</sup> Am I wrong? Am I being selfish? Lord, Lord . . . enlighten me; this conflict is pressuring me from all sides . . . The men of the world call me crazy, and the man of God does too . . . just in a different way.

My dear sister, now do you see how lonely I am? I have no one to help me, except for Mary, my dear Mother . . . After hearing the preacher's words, I threw myself at Her feet. Completely withdrawn, not even hearing the noise that people made as they left the church, I once more told Our Lady what I've told her so many times: "Mary, my Mother, you already know what I'm going through . . . I only want to do one thing, and that is love God . . . and only that, even though the world is calling me, even though from a *human* perspective people think I'm useless and wasting my time. Mother, tell your Son all this . . . place me at His feet, and tell Him that I don't know how to do anything else,

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<sup>615</sup> This priest was Rafael's former confessor (see Letter 72). Los Luises was a confraternity of university students of which Rafael had been a founding member (see Letter 5).

<sup>616</sup> See Luke 10:40.

now that my every act is love . . . Tell Him that I didn't know if that was for the best or not, but I couldn't do anything else."

I am confident that the Virgin heard me, because She filled me with peace and joy . . . above all, at knowing that the world was against me, and that everything God was giving me was hidden, completely hidden, from its sight.

Afterwards, when I read Saint John of the Cross and saw what he has to say about this, I was so consoled and so grateful to God . . . Make sure to read stanza XXIX and the footnote.<sup>617</sup>

Anyway, my dearest sister, I don't mean to annoy you with all this, although I'm just doing what you asked me to, which is telling you my heart's desires . . . expressing my love for God (which is inexpressible), and returning your confidence by pouring out my heart to you completely.

You've asked me what I get out of your letters; the answer is, a great deal of consolation . . . Oh little sister, you are so good to me! The Lord will repay you! . . . I couldn't possibly complain of being alone, no, not at all. Besides, even if I were, it would be for such a short time, right? As long as our bodies are on earth and our hearts are in heaven, everything will be a struggle . . . but a divine struggle in which Mary fights on

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<sup>617</sup> Here, Rafael directs his aunt to read Stanza 29 of the *Spiritual Cantic*: "If, then, I am no longer / seen or found on the common, / you will say that I am lost; / that, stricken by love, / I lost myself, and was found." (John of the Cross, *Collected Works*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez [Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1991], 475). The content of the footnote he mentions is unknown.

our side, and the Nazarene always emerges triumphant . . . that blessed Jesus without whom we cannot live. Isn't that so?

I'll expect your reply on Monday or Tuesday.

How are things going with the Nazareth House?<sup>618</sup>

I'll leave it there again for now, because I'm off to the Salesian church.<sup>619</sup> There's nobody there now, so it's a good time . . . Talk to you soon.

My dearest sister, it's now one-thirty, and I am going to leave you here, because I'm going to go sleep for a bit, and then back to church again, and I want this letter to go out today. Besides, I can't write anything during the day; somebody leaves, then somebody else comes in, and everyone must be attended to. I have more peace and quiet at night, even if it does mean I sleep less.

All yours, your poor brother who loves you too much,

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<sup>618</sup> *Nazareth House*: An orphanage of which María was a significant patron (OC 456; see also Letters 85 and 87).

<sup>619</sup> The Church of the Sacred Heart of Jesus (*Iglesia del Sagrado Corazón de Jesús*) in Oviedo was formerly part of the Monastery of the Visitation of Holy Mary (*Monasterio de la Visitación de Santa María*). Members of the Order of the Visitation, founded by Saints Francis de Sales and Jane de Chantal in 1610, are sometimes referred to as the "Salesian Sisters" (*Las Salesas*) after their co-founder. When the Order left Oviedo during the Spanish Civil War, the church was used as a field hospital before ultimately becoming a Jesuit parish in 1941.

*Brother María Rafael*

*O.C.R.*

Let's see if it's true about the fire . . . Whether the logs are big or small, all that matters is that they burn, and that they never burn out . . . Sending *the usual* . . . receive it through Mary's hands.

## 76. to María Osorio

Oviedo, November 26, 1935

J-H-S

My dearest sister,

I don't know how to begin. Today, your letter was something I don't know how to begin to thank God for, let alone you . . . May He bless you.

I'll just say that for the past few days, I've been meditating on this reading from the Office of Sext: *Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.*<sup>620</sup>

What a consolation, isn't it? What are we doing? I don't know exactly, but this morning, I saw a very sweet and very Christian charity in your letter . . . You want to help and console me, and assist me in carrying my cross, as my "Cyrenian"<sup>621</sup> . . . Blessed be the love of creatures that does such things . . . Blessed be the Lord who gives us a heart that, sure, makes us suffer sometimes. But in exchange, that heart lets us experience such pure and natural delight when we encounter souls who love us, the way you showed me in your letter that you do . . . My dear sister, you are an angel sent to me by the Lord when I most needed you . . . I hope you don't mind me saying so, but that's how I see it.

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<sup>620</sup> Gal 6:2. The Office of Sext, named for its traditional recitation at the "sixth hour" (noon), is one of the canonical hours of the Liturgy of the Hours.

<sup>621</sup> *Cyrenian*: A reference to Simon of Cyrene, who helped Jesus carry the cross (see Luke 23:26).

Right now, as I begin writing you, I've just returned from the Handmaids' convent; it's six-thirty.<sup>622</sup> There, before the Lord, and with your letter in my pocket, I nearly wept for joy . . . How greatly You love me, O Lord! . . . If only you could see how happy I am, little sister . . . As are you. Isn't that so?

Listen, I went to tell Jesus everything, as I always do when I receive a letter from you . . . First I made an act of thanksgiving; He treats me better than I deserve; anyway, no need to repeat the usual. Then, meditating in His presence on some of the things you told me, which you asked me not to be angry about . . . blessed be God, I'm not angry, and you have nothing to be sorry for . . . you might think so, you might think *that's how I am*, well . . . I told the Lord about this and we *laughed* together for a bit . . . In all honesty, that's what happened. Jesus gave me to understand that it's all the same to Him, and that as far as He and His Mother are concerned, it's pretty much a draw . . . no matter what you may think about me . . .

You really are such a poor thing, my dear sister. You make me laugh, I almost envy your naïveté. You can tell me anything . . . God knows everything, and besides, I tell Him all about it later . . .

When I did that this afternoon, I was suddenly filled with great joy as I realized that the Lord was listening to me and that He was smiling along with me . . . And I didn't do this, because I remembered the people praying around me, but if they hadn't been there, I'd have broken out laughing like a fool, I'm telling you . . .

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<sup>622</sup> *Handmaids*: see Letter 72.

Then I was quietened, and that somewhat inopportune joy was transformed into such a great peace . . . If only you knew, sister, how good God is . . . I forgot everything, I forgot myself, I forgot you . . . everything. Jesus loves me so . . . my dear sister, love God dearly . . . if only you knew. Anyway.

Then I realized that there was still a poor old lady sitting next to me in church, and she started coughing excessively. At first I was annoyed . . . and then I was so ashamed at having been annoyed that I took that poor woman by the hand and presented her to the Virgin. I asked Our Lady to help her . . . and her cough stopped. Then I focused on praying for her. I started with the little old woman sitting next to me, and I ended up putting every single one of the faithful praying in that church under the Virgin's mantle . . . Sometimes I experience these sudden fits . . . and I honestly have to work at keeping still; anyway, you get the idea.

I stayed at church until they ~~through~~ threw me out (I always forget how to spell that word, forgive my shortcomings). When I left, I was so delighted to have been with Jesus that I had an urge to hug the sacristan. Oh little sister, I am so happy! Jesus loves me so! . . .

You do have to forgive me for telling you all this, but I want you to participate in my joys just as much as . . . I was going to say "in my sorrows" . . . but well, leave my sorrows be. They don't last long; the Lord doesn't let me stop to think about them. He doesn't want me to be selfish. And if my previous letters have been tinged with sadness, do forgive me . . . I'm still so miserable.

In your letter you said that, given how much love we have for God, we must be joyful. When I read that, I could not help but bless the Lord with that holy joy of knowing

we are His . . . of finding ourselves almost ablaze with Him . . . Sadness and worry begone . . . God and God alone . . . I'm telling you, if we always saw it that way, our life would be almost heaven on earth . . . it would all come down to loving God and knowing we are loved by Him . . . What a concert we'd put on! Wouldn't we? In unison with the angels and the saints and Mary! . . . Then indeed we would not be able to keep still in prayer, and those fits would occur with such frequency that at some point . . . Oh, Lord! How long must You keep me here in search of You, looking for You, loudly calling out Your name . . . without giving my heart rest or repose? . . . And seeing how our misery prevents us from rejoicing in You once and for all?

How selfish we are, Lord! Do with me what You will, pay me no mind. I don't deserve Your love. But Lord, those words aren't coming from my heart. My heart does beg Your love, and asks You to take it at once . . . and either stretch it out, or make it stop beating . . . Lord, this is no life . . . my Life is in You, and sometimes You seem so far away! Oh, my Lord and my God!<sup>623</sup>

Look, my dear sister, I only have one thing to offer today . . . God . . . so that's what I'm sending you.

I want this letter to go out today. It's seven-thirty and the mail goes out at eight-thirty. Even if it's just a quick note, I didn't want you to spend tomorrow without receiving what I'd wanted to send your way.

My next letter will be longer, and I'll tell you what I'm going to do during the sacred time of Advent. Tonight I'll start writing you, and answering your letter more

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<sup>623</sup> John 20:28.



thoroughly. I do indeed see our good Mother in it . . . I can see how much you love her already . . .

How good you are, little sister. May God repay you.

Don't think about me going to La Trapa . . . what's that to you? I'll always be the same to you. Don't you think so?

I can't say anything else for today. There's *something inside me* that won't let me. Sending my greatest affection, your poor crazy brother,

*Brother María Rafael, O.C.R.*

*Forgive him!!!*

P.S. I'm sending you a letter I received from my monastery.<sup>624</sup> It doesn't say anything, but it says so much to me . . . How good Jesus is . . . Everything is a consolation.

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<sup>624</sup> This letter has not been preserved (OC 460).

## 77. to María Osorio

Oviedo, November 27, 1935

J-H-S

My dear sister,

The clock has just struck midnight in London; we heard it over the radio. Everybody has gone to bed, and I'm sitting down to start writing you a long letter, because the one I wrote you this afternoon didn't say anything at all. I was in such a rush to make it in time for the mail to go out that I left out everything important.

But when I pick up my pen and there's silence, as there is now, that's when the party really gets going . . . I'm calm and collected, I gaze toward the Virgin, I commend myself to Her, and time starts flying.

Don't you fret about me losing hours of sleep at night so that I can write . . . I make up for it with the *siesta*. It's just that nobody is around to bother me at night, and I need silence, if only you knew how much I lack it . . . I understand very well that my cousins' commotion doesn't always let you collect yourself . . . But that *noise* is almost better . . . than another kind of *noise* to which you must pay attention . . . for fear of lacking in charity. Am I making sense? . . . Don't you worry about this. Look, you might have a lot of noise around the house, but you have your solitude . . . For His sake, don't even think about crying over a little thing like that.

At home, I have to pay attention to *everything* . . . I have to talk, and laugh, and say something back. If I keep quiet, my father immediately asks me if I'm sad . . . This morning I told him I'm never quiet . . . I'm just thinking about other things that take me

away from the conversation. So often, and without meaning to, I just can't think of anything to say, and I keep quiet . . . This morning I was so delighted with your letter . . . that I didn't say anything to them, I needed the silence . . . and right away my father thought that I was sad, when in fact it's exactly the opposite, I was more cheerful and upbeat than a guitar.

And so, after enduring a whole day with so little silence in it, when nighttime falls and I've said my prayers, I take up my pen and prepare for you to listen to what I have to say. And knowing, *as I know*, that you receive my letters joyfully, and that you don't mind it when I tell you everything that comes to mind, even if it's nonsense . . . knowing this, I feel such great consolation in talking to you that I feel like I don't have enough paper and the words write themselves. But sometimes I have so much to tell you, and so much to share with you, and so much love for you . . . that I can't get anything out at all, and I get all mixed up . . . But you don't mind, right? Now, I'll calmly prepare to respond to your letter.

What you said about not having risen to certain heights, etc . . . I have nothing to add; I said what I had to say in my previous letter . . . Not only am I not angry with you, but in fact you've really made me laugh quite a bit . . . Of course, you've decided to be my *little sister* . . . and that is what you shall become. I don't need to say anything more, because you say that you understand me, both what I say and what I don't . . . Blessed be God! Isn't that so? I understand you perfectly too, and essentially, God makes that possible in order to console us . . . He is so good, isn't He? . . . You know what I've

noticed? . . . Ever since I decided not to stop and gather “flowers”<sup>625</sup> . . . God showers me with them . . . What about you? It’s as if He does nothing else but send them, I don’t know what to do. Anyway, I’m going to keep responding to your letter, because otherwise . . .

You said that you commended yourself to the Virgin before writing me; I can tell. You can be satisfied that I received *everything* you wanted me to . . . See, little sister? The Virgin listens to you. She never fails, and if you do everything in this manner, you’ll see how well things will turn out for you.

I’m also very pleased because I can see how much you love Her . . . How good our dear Mother is! Do you remember when I joked that you and I were going to hold a competition for Her love? . . . Well, from our correspondence, it seems that it’s underway . . . That ought to make Our Lady laugh, don’t you think?

Take heart, little sister, and carry on with Mary. If I could get you to love Her dearly . . . such great consolation would accompany me to La Trapa. And when I get there, and have Her so close by, I’ll tell Her, “Virgin Mary, You are everything in my monastic life . . . I love You so much. I am nothing, but I am leaving behind one soul in this world who is very close to You too . . . Listen, my little sister loves You very much

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<sup>625</sup> “Seeking my Love / I will head for the mountains and for watersides, / I will not gather flowers, / nor fear wild beasts; / I will go beyond strong men and frontiers” (John of the Cross, *Collected Works*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez [Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1991], 471). See Letter 70 for Rafael and María’s prior discussion of this poem.

too . . . Listen to her, and see that she is a poor beggar who can do nothing on her own. Virgin Mary, I'm not bringing all my love for You with me to La Trapa . . . I *left behind* a little bit in the world . . . I left it for You in a soul that needed it. Now, Mary, there's only one thing left to do . . . You have to make that little *bit* I've left behind grow more and more each day . . . Don't leave her like this, Mother. Make use of my little offerings and sacrifices . . . I'm coming to La Trapa in order to love You, for the sake of those who don't know You . . . What a shame! But look, I have the tremendous, enormous consolation of having helped one soul love You more . . . I am sure of it. Blessed Virgin Mary, protect us both."

Shall I say that to Mary, my dear sister? I think so . . .

I'm so pleased that you speak of the Virgin in your letters. This is the greatest joy you could give me. I'm a bit mad when it comes to the Virgin; forgive me. But look, it's just that I haven't ever been able to talk to anyone else like this before, you know? Only ever to Her. But now, seeing your willing soul . . . and moreover, I'll be honest, seeing how far you have come . . . it consoles me greatly . . . Mary is so sweet. If only you knew how much She loves us Trappists!

When I sent you that holy card with the *Salve*, I knew it would do you a great deal of good.<sup>626</sup> The card itself is worthless . . . but it's Mary. It was already quite worn, but don't worry if it gets faded or frayed. May your poor heart encounter in the Most Blessed Virgin the tenderness of a mother, of a sister—that is what really matters. May you speak to Her with total honesty; talk of Her divine Son; ask Her for anything; and have

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<sup>626</sup> See Letter 71.

confidence in Her. Then you'll see, things will go well for you. I'll pray to Her for this intention now, and I always will; I'll never forget, don't you worry. I do this for Her, and also for you.

You'll say I'm being a bit tiresome, that I'm always going on about the same things . . . I'm sorry. Or rather, I'm not sorry at all . . . I'm perfectly happy to be such a bother. When it comes to the Virgin, I could keep on writing for ages, and I'd always be saying the same thing . . . But I know you don't really mind. As such, don't worry if you *forget that you love Her* from time to time . . . Such moments of weakness come and go quickly. In my littleness, I will help you greatly before Her. You'll see, you'll win Her love . . . I promise you, soon you'll never forget about Her. Anyway, I'm going to move on to something else, because if not, I'll keep on about this forever.

So what if you can't take any more? Well, don't worry. I can't say anything on that subject; I'll just say, that's what you think . . . So what if you have a little soul? . . . What do you know? What do you care if your soul is little or great? Look, my dear sister, don't focus on the vessel's volume, or whether or not the water is overflowing . . . Focus on the water's purity, its freshness, its clarity . . . Look and see whether the water filling you has anything in it that might cloud it . . . make sure it is clear and transparent, but don't worry about the amount. For some, a single, shining, clear dewdrop is enough; others need a torrent, still others a waterfall . . . What's it to you? Am I making sense? I don't know how to put this into words.

Of course, in such a state, a soul can never be satisfied . . . but God cannot give us all that we ask for. If He did . . . poor us! It's as if we wanted to fit the whole sea into a glass of water . . . But the day is coming . . . Listen, little sister: grab hold of your crucifix

and love Jesus with *all* your strength. Don't worry about anything else. He will do whatever you cannot do. What poor little things we are! And how great Jesus is!

You told me about your prayer, about remaining in silence before God . . . I understand. Neither desire nor ask for anything more. If only I could talk to you about this! But it's so hard in writing, even though I know what you're describing . . . How good it is to pray like that! Isn't it? God fills the soul with such gentleness . . . Lord, Lord! What have we done? What will we do with ourselves, sister?

Anyway, let us be quiet, these noisy words are a hindrance . . . I don't know what to tell you, but if you see the work of God in me . . . I see many things in you too . . . I bless God for all of it.

I'll leave it there until tomorrow, when I will continue, God willing.

It's seven-thirty in the evening. Now that I seemingly have some time, I'll continue.

If only you knew, my dear sister, how tired I am sometimes . . . Not physically, mind you . . . God never ceases to be continually present to me . . . That is my only consolation. But dealing with creatures grows ever more tiresome . . . That happens to you too, doesn't it?

When the weather's good and I can, I take the car out on my own, drive a few kilometers from Oviedo, and stop at an overlook on the highway that affords a splendid view. Sometimes I read Saint John of the Cross, other times I ponder what I've already read . . . and thinking of God, I spend a good deal of time there. Then, at twelve-thirty, I go make my visit to the Lord.

Today I wasn't able to do that; I had to take my father to Infiesto. We left after Holy Mass, and came back at one o'clock.

My life is completely disorganized . . . I pray in fits and starts. Today I made five visits.<sup>627</sup> You won't believe me, but I don't have time for anything. May it all serve Him.

I spend all day singing Saint John of the Cross's verses to the Lord . . . If only you knew how much consolation that saint gives me; what I've told you is the least of it. I always carry him around in a little compartment in the car . . . As I walk, I do nothing but ask the valleys and mountains, and the creatures I encounter on the way, and humans and animals, and the earth and the sky, if they have seen my Beloved,<sup>628</sup> "him I love most."<sup>629</sup> This thought gives me wings; I am always so moved inside.

"I don't know how I endure, not living where I live . . ." <sup>630</sup>

I spend all day in a daze.

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<sup>627</sup> That is, visits to the Blessed Sacrament.

<sup>628</sup> *Have you seen him whom my soul loves?* (Song 3:3).

<sup>629</sup> From the *Spiritual Canticle*: "Shepherds, you who go / up through the sheepfolds to the hill, / if by chance you see / him I love most, / tell him I am sick, I suffer, and I die" (John of the Cross, *Collected Works*, 471).

<sup>630</sup> "How do you endure / O life, not living where you live, / and being brought near death / by the arrows you receive / from that which you conceive of your Beloved?" (John of the Cross, *Collected Works*, 472).



Oh, dear sister, how happy I am! How hidden is my Jesus . . . how anxiously I beg Him to “reveal his presence” to me, even if I cannot bear it and “the vision of his beauty be my death” . . . <sup>631</sup>

Such a great love for God for such a little soul, as you would say. How good the Lord is! How I desire silence and recollection, so as to quietly love God forever . . . forever, without distractions or noise, in the humility of my Trappist oblate’s habit . . . ! How happy I will be, with or without a cross, but always with Jesus . . . Now I don’t know what I’m on about.

There is so much I want to say to you . . . I want to tell you about me, and I am telling you about God. I want to open my heart to you, and in it, I find only God. I want to send you so many different things in my letters . . . and all I can send you is love for God . . .

Don’t you believe that I’m flying, not at all. I’m just drifting . . . trailing close to the ground, while my heart and even my eyes are fixed on that sweet, calm Jesus of Nazareth, who is looking at me, waiting for me, loving me more than I’ll ever know . . . What am I to do? I don’t know. Be astonished, get confused, kiss the ground . . . go mad with joy . . . Since I can’t *shout* all this at the world, I *shout it at you* from the very depths of my soul.

My dear sister, don’t look at me, don’t think about me . . . look to Jesus, think of Jesus . . . love Jesus. And you’ll see, then you won’t be able to separate yourself from

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<sup>631</sup> “Reveal your presence / and may the vision of your beauty be my death” (John of the Cross, *Collected Works*,, 473).

Him, and the world will seem all too small for His love. Does it not fit inside you? . . .

Lord, make her burst immediately . . . My poor sister, she doesn't have enough room yet for so much love for God . . . Poor thing, she has a treasure but doesn't know what to do with it . . . Is it weighing you down? How good it is to be crushed beneath such a weight . . . The weight of an immense love for God, with a heart torn to pieces from all that *silent shouting*. If only you knew how much that hurts . . . But how sweet and tender it is to suffer for love . . .

Jesus, I don't know what I'm on about, don't pay me any mind.

But other than when I was napping, I've been like this all day . . . Now, you are permitting me to unburden myself with you . . . so I am calmer.

My soul is so full!! I don't know what is happening to me. As a rule, I am filled with such peace and joy . . . and a mad desire to be holy . . . I'm not satisfied with little either, I feel the same way you do . . . To the greatest heights! . . . Though I do not expect things too great for me, nor is my heart proud, as David says.<sup>632</sup> It's just that in my littleness, I can do nothing, but with God, I can do all things, and with Mary's help, I can do even more . . . You'll see how, with those two things, and without relying on *ourselves* for *anything at all*, we'll become saints . . .

We need to hurry up, little sister. Seeing *how much we already have*, we have a huge *responsibility* in God's eyes. I worry about this sometimes . . . it would be terrible not to respond as we ought, wouldn't it?

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<sup>632</sup> *O Lord, my heart is not lifted up, my eyes are not raised too high; I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvelous for me (Ps 131:1).*

Anyway, we'll help each other, won't we? . . . I tell you everything so that you can pray to the Lord for me. But I don't want to be selfish . . . I'm more concerned with your affairs than my own, even when it comes to material things . . . My poor sister, you must be having such a hard time with all the gossip and stories going around . . .

I've been thinking a lot about your trip to Madrid, and you've been very much on my mind, but how good it is to have something to suffer through . . . I don't wish to take anything away from you, but I am *at your side* through *all of it*. That's the most I can do; will that suffice? It's a small thing, but look, I'm doing it for Christ, as He commands us. You'll see, everything will be resolved . . . and resolved well.

I still haven't received a letter from Uncle Polín . . . If only you knew how much I am thinking of him.

The day before yesterday, I received a letter from my grandmother . . . Poor thing, she loves me so . . . She begs me to write her, for charity's sake; of course, I must . . . I've realized that, as long as I am in this world, the mission entrusted to me by the Lord is to help others love Him . . . I have offered myself to Him for this task, and I believe He has accepted me. As you can see, the Lord is bringing about a marvelous change in my family, I think.

As I give up everything, I make my renunciation with great joy, knowing that I can help my Christian father in doing so . . . I am capable of doing anything that might get a brother of mine in this world to do a single act of love for God . . . This is not arrogance; I say this with an open heart, and this is exactly how I feel . . . as God well knows.

Nobody at home is surprised that you are writing me or that I write you back . . . Several times, my mother has asked me what you were talking about . . . and I told her the truth . . . I told her that you placed great confidence in me and were telling me your *spiritual difficulties*; and that, returning that confidence and *doing what I could*, I was replying in order to help you love God . . . They thought that was perfectly reasonable.

One day Leopoldo<sup>633</sup> asked me if I was translating *Don Quixote* into Greek . . . They've never seen me write this much.

Don't worry about that, then. All this is for my eyes only, and I leave it all at the Virgin's feet.

Don't hesitate to write me, even when I'm back at La Trapa . . . if you ever need me . . . (what am I thinking, who am I to be needed) . . . Anyway, you know what I mean . . . Don't think that La Trapa is some abyss or fortress . . . In La Trapa there is enough charity for both the brothers on the inside and the brethren on the outside; be assured of that . . . Don't let that thought discourage you. Quite the contrary—if I were to remain in the world, you might still worry that life would take me here or there . . . But in La Trapa, you know exactly where I am . . . and what I'm doing: I'll be at the Virgin's feet, always, at all times. You can come see me and tell me about your life . . . I will speak to you about God, and I'll always encourage you to be holy. You will have that consolation . . . and I will not.

You'll always have a brother . . . and a Trappist brother at that . . . A brother who can't offer you what a brother in the worldly sense can (and I don't mean your brothers,

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<sup>633</sup> Rafael's younger brother, Leopoldo Arnáiz Barón.

which you've never really had)<sup>634</sup> . . . You'll always have a brother, a true brother, in Christ, and through Christ; and he'll always love you with the greatest affection . . .

Everything is compatible with being a Trappist, and now that I love God more, I love my parents and brothers and sisters *more* and *better*. Only God understands such mysteries of the heart . . . What more do you want, little sister? . . . I can't offer you much, for I am no one, I am nothing . . . But accept this humbly, thank the Virgin for it, and pray for me; if only you knew, I need it now more than ever . . . My soul wants to fly, but this body . . . This body gives me so much to do.

A battle awaits me . . . A battle of a month or more, because I won't be able to go until at least mid-January . . . and even if I don't want that, God permits it, and I'd be lying if I told you that renouncing everything anew was only somewhat difficult for me . . . I already know what La Trapa is. Even though I'll be given some reprieve as a sick person . . . if only you knew, bodies and matter hold us back so much, while the world clings so tightly . . . giving up so many joys, even very good and proper ones, is hard. And sometimes the evil spirit pressures me, and while he never takes away the peace God gives me . . . I can tell you that he makes me suffer.

Of course, I wouldn't trade that small hardship for all the world's glories . . . but I am weak, a creature of flesh and blood, with a heart and soul, and parents and siblings,

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<sup>634</sup> María had four siblings: a sister, Soledad; two brothers, Gerardo and Francisco Javier; and a half-brother, Ramón. As devout Catholics and members of the nobility, the family was a target of violence during the Spanish Civil War. All three of María's brothers were killed on November 28, 1936, during the Paracuellos massacre.

and very dear friends, and such holy affections . . . I have to leap over all that in order to embrace the blessed cross, where Jesus is waiting for me . . . That leap is hard for me to make, but when I look over to the other side, and I see Mary with open arms alongside Her Son Jesus, who is looking at me and calling me with such love . . . I assure you, I forget everything else . . . No need to pity me, I don't want to make you sad . . . I'm not . . . I'd do it all a thousand times over if God asked me to. What do my tears matter? They are human tears, the tears of the *old self*<sup>635</sup> . . . They don't deserve my attention, let alone yours . . . I am so happy to be able to offer the Lord some of what He has given me.

I am so grateful for the help and consolation that you offer me . . . You are so good to me, may God reward you . . . I can see God in this. He is helping me in an extraordinary way . . . but He has made a sweet gesture . . . in offering me a soul like yours; you, who amid your own sufferings, are willing to lend me a hand . . . Well, dear sister to my soul, I'll take it. You are indeed helping me, much more than you realize . . . Anyway, only God knows what my heart feels, and I would tell you . . . but since you understand even my silence, I'll keep quiet and not say anything at all.

What did your siblings have to say in Madrid? When is Uncle Polín coming back? Tell me everything, if that would console you. As you can see, that's exactly what I do with you.

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<sup>635</sup> *You have stripped off the old self with its practices and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator (Col 3:9-10). See also Rom 6:6.*

I'll leave it there for now, because it's time for dinner. I'll keep going after everyone has gone to bed. Talk to you later, my dear sister.

All right, listen, it's eleven-thirty now and I don't have much time, because tomorrow my parents and I are going to go to Covadonga<sup>636</sup> for Mass, and I'll have to get up early, at six. I'll need to shave, then go get the car, and then it's eighty kilometers<sup>637</sup> . . . It takes two hours from here. I promised you I'd go to Covadonga one of these days, so I am . . . My parents think it's just some whim of mine . . . and tonight at dinner we decided to go . . . I'm very pleased. You'll see, everything will be resolved . . . The Virgin, or *La Santina* as they call her here, will make it so.

Merceditas and my mother have just gone to bed; my father and Leopoldo are listening to a concert in Germany . . . I can hear the notes of the piano clearly from here . . . If only you knew how deficient I find music now, having enjoyed it so much before . . . My God, what will heaven be like! . . . We'll know soon, won't we? Don't you worry about anything. Everything is passing away . . . You'll see, there, we'll be with our Jesus for *real* . . . Sometimes I get so impatient . . . I can't help it . . . We are sojourners on this earth,<sup>638</sup> and our Beloved is taking so long to arrive.

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<sup>636</sup> The Holy Cave of Our Lady of Covadonga is the site of a Marian apparition and shrine in Covadonga, Asturias (see Letter 73). Our Lady of Covadonga is also known as "La Santina," her Asturian-language nickname.

<sup>637</sup> Eighty kilometers is approximately fifty miles.

<sup>638</sup> Ps 119:19.

Oh, my dear little sister, if only I could put into words what I feel in such moments . . . How great God is! If only you could see how He has transformed me . . . I no longer recognize myself. My God, what do You want from me? . . . I have nothing left to give You, I've already given You everything . . . Lord, don't leave me like this; take me at once, and for good . . . Lord, silence me, for my heart will not let me rest even a moment as long as it is boiling over.

Oh, sister, I envy your peaceful prayer, your tranquil gaze toward God, your silence before Him . . . I can't have any of that. I understand it, but sometimes I just can't . . . Listen, if I look at Him, I melt . . . I can't, I can't take it. If I contemplate His love for me, something pierces me, I don't know what . . . I can't put it into words . . .

I want to cry out . . . Am I making sense? . . . What a poor little thing I am. Lord, Lord, forgive Your servant, who knows not what he is saying.<sup>639</sup>

You forgive me too, my sister; have mercy on me. I've gone mad. I never knew before what it was to love God . . . It is so sweet, it's incomprehensible, it's terrible . . . It makes one wish one's heart would stop beating, at the same time, one desires ever more and more. I don't know, one ends up totally perplexed . . . Anyway, may the Virgin come to my aid.

You've asked how I will prepare to await the arrival of the Child Jesus. I don't know, I'm overwhelmed . . . I'll wait, that's all . . . And if that's not enough? I know . . . I'll wait with great love, I'll wait with faith . . . I'll wait impatiently, and sometimes peacefully . . . I don't know, I'll just wait . . . That's all I could do last year.

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<sup>639</sup> Luke 23:34.



Starting this coming Sunday, I'm going to put together a life plan in order to be more focused. I don't want to let even a minute go to waste. When I have ten minutes free, I'll go to the Tabernacle, and there, close to Jesus and the Virgin . . . I'll wait. I'll tell you what I end up doing and how, so that together, we can focus entirely on that.

The world, meanwhile, is busy with its own affairs. May it leave us in peace by the Tabernacle . . . You, gaze at Him with that peace, if you have it; speak to Him in silence; gaze at Him and wait. I'll try to do the same . . . if I can, that is. Sometimes I get impatient . . .

Of course, it is a season of penance and recollection. I can't say anything regarding the former . . . The Lord will instruct me, and I don't dare promise anything yet. I don't want to repeat what happened last year, when I was in La Trapa and I asked for the disciplines<sup>640</sup> we used there . . . and either I lost them or they took them away from me. I dare not ask.

But anyway, since I don't keep secrets from you, I'll tell you all about it . . . I don't know if that's a mistake, but since we agreed that you'd tear up my letters . . . You will, won't you? One day Uncle Polín scolded me because he said that I needed to be more simple . . . That's fine, but everything I tell you is for your good; maybe somebody else would laugh it off . . . I don't mind being laughed at, but I do mind if God is caught in the crossfire . . . Am I making sense?

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<sup>640</sup> *Disciplines*: instruments of physical penance; see Letter 40.

Well, it's twelve o'clock now. Time to pray the *Angelus* to the Virgin, then the *Salve* and three Hail Marys; then I'll place myself at the feet of the crucified Jesus, and in holy peace, I'll try to fall asleep. Tomorrow I'll tell you what I did in Covadonga.

November 28

My dear sister, I'll now take a few moments to finish this letter so it can go out today . . . I don't have much time; my father and I are leaving shortly to make our visit to the Lord.

This morning we left at seven, and we came back to eat at a quarter past two. I can't put it into words . . . it's best if you just imagine it. I think everything is going to be all right now . . . I placed you at the feet of Our Lady of Covadonga . . . When I received the Lord . . . I could hardly say anything to Him, even though I'd been preparing for our conversation the whole way there, which is a two-hour trip . . . but no matter.

I have so many things I want to tell you . . . but if I do, this letter is going to go on too long . . . Don't pay attention to the number of things I'm telling you, or the messy order I tell them in . . . But with you, I don't worry about that, or bother to organize my ideas. I just write whatever comes to me.

Today is Thursday, I won't write you again until Sunday . . . I have to write my grandmother, and Brother María Jesús, a young brother of mine who is away from the monastery, and Almenas, who wrote me this morning<sup>641</sup> . . . As you can see, it's as if I

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<sup>641</sup> *My grandmother*: Fernanda Torres; *Brother María Jesús*: Jesús Sandoval, oblate at San Isidro from March 1932 to August 1935; *Almenas*: see Letter 62.

were somebody important. But in all honesty, if I can bring little rays of light and God's love to souls through my letters, I'll spend the rest of my life with a pen in my hand.

I'll expect your letter on Sunday, or before. Will it arrive by then? . . . I don't want to rush you, you do enough, and you've already done enough as it is. I deserve nothing, I assure you. Write me on your own time, calmly, whenever you like.

This morning my father got very emotional at Communion, and he was crying. May God bless him; pray for him . . . The Lord will repay you, and so will I, however I can . . .

My parents and I were alone in the Holy Cave . . . We were deep in recollection. How good the Lord is! I prayed two *Salves* to the Virgin, one for you and one for me. I believe that She heard me; I am so content, little sister. Mary loves me so much. Now, especially when I pray the *Salve*, I pause at the words, "and after this our exile, show unto us the blessed fruit of thy womb, Jesus." Will Mary "show us Jesus"? Yes, She will; you'll see. We'll receive Him through Her, and thanks to Mary, this Christmas we'll have Him in the world, so very close to us.

That's all, my dear little sister. May the Lord bless you . . . Receive all my love, and anything else you wish; I send you all that I can, which is *the usual*, along with my great affection. Your brother,

*Brother María Rafael, O.C.R.*

**78. to María Osorio**

Oviedo, December 1, 1935

First Sunday of Advent

J-H-S

*Prepare the way of the Lord: make His paths straight.*<sup>642</sup>

My dear little sister,

I received your letter the other day. I'll say the same thing you did: the more you feel, the less you can put it into words.

Out of everything you said, there's just one thing I'm going to respond to . . . because as far as I can tell, either I haven't explained myself properly, or I haven't quite gotten this right . . . nevertheless, I understand you.

You said that I don't understand the joy you feel at "immersing yourself in your littleness." Listen, every soul is a mystery that only God can penetrate . . . He alone can understand us completely . . . But sometimes He allows creatures a great consolation . . . which is seeing the many different ways that He uses to draw souls.

Seeing Him *at work* in creatures' hearts . . . the consolation (human though it may be) of knowing you are being helped and understood . . . being encouraged . . . Anyway, what can I say? . . . I'll say this: I don't merely understand the joy you are feeling . . . in fact, I *don't think of you any other way*. Don't you remember how we talked about this on various occasions? . . . Moreover, I envy your simplicity of heart in seeing yourself this way.

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<sup>642</sup> Matt 3:3; see also Isa 40:3; Mark 1:3; and Luke 3:4.

I ask the Virgin Mary to enlighten us both, so that I might explain myself well and you might understand me.

Yesterday, while I was praying the Rosary to Mary, I was distracted without meaning to be, and I was thinking about you and what you said to me . . . Many things came to mind . . . Now I've forgotten them all, I'm a mess . . . Believe me, I think less and less by the day . . . I thought about writing them all down for you that night, but I couldn't . . . I'll try to do it now (it's twelve o'clock).

My dear sister, you can indeed be pleased at how little you seem before God . . . Your joy is that of one who knows she is protected by a good God . . . It gives you great peace to *know* that you *cannot do anything*, and that He is the one who does everything, isn't that right? . . . I can't explain it; of course, you know better than I do, but I do understand it . . . *Your nothingness is your consolation, your littleness is your joy*, because feeling little makes you feel more coddled by God . . . and that's not easy to explain, it's something you feel, that's all . . . You won't deny that this is a consolation, and one of the greatest there is . . . God gives great sweetness to the soul . . . when that soul, finding itself alone and little and wretched, seeing how small and humble it is, submerges itself in God, and then God fills it . . . There is nothing more to do . . . poor us!

My sister, I can see that this is your path . . . humility before God and men . . . A hidden and simple life . . . and being the littlest of all the souls who love Christ, but loving Him like no one has ever loved Him before. Isn't that right? . . .

Yes, I know what you're going through, and I understand. Your soul rejoices in its littleness, because that way, as I said, you feel more coddled by Jesus. By putting yourself last, you find great consolation . . . It's only natural, what more can you do? . . .

if you can't do anything at all . . . You are weak, you are wretched, you want to love Jesus and you don't know how . . . and none of that discourages you. On the contrary, finding yourself in such a state, you understand that a heart like yours, so full of human sentiments . . . cannot aspire to anything . . . to anything more than finding yourself last among God's creatures . . . humbling yourself in His presence, considering yourself little in His eyes, and immersing yourself in Him. This fills you with an intense joy . . . I don't know how to explain it, but I think I understand you . . . Tell me honestly if I'm mistaken.

Anyway (look, read me charitably), knowing how you are . . . I believe that you are capable of even more. We decided not to "gather flowers."<sup>643</sup> Finding that your *nothingness* is your *consolation* . . . don't stop and think about yourself.

If it makes you happy to realize how little you are before God, that's all well and good. But it seems to me—and forgive me, I'm nobody—that it would be more perfect not to be happy about this . . . Do you understand what I mean?

It would be better if you dispensed with yourself entirely . . . The less you look at yourself, the better you'll see God. Don't you agree? . . . May the Lord grant you true humility . . . but once you've felt it, keep moving forward. Don't stop to consider your humility, for that would be to stop and consider yourself . . . Don't stop to consider your littleness, for that would be to stop and consider yourself . . . Keep moving forward. Climb toward the Lord, and when you are with Him, you'll see, you'll essentially *feel that you are nothing* . . . you'll love Him without *realizing* it . . . Then He will truly fill us completely . . . We'll disappear, and He will be *all*.

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<sup>643</sup> A reference to Saint John of the Cross; see notes in Letters 70 and 77.

Do you understand what I'm saying, my dear sister? Don't listen to everything I'm saying, this is just how I see it . . . and in my previous letters, I may not have explained myself well. I just want you to be very holy, very much in God, very exalted, even though you're always saying over and over again that you're nothing, that you can't do anything, that you're little, that you're the last among all . . .

I don't care. Despite all that . . . dispense with that *consolation* of seeing yourself in this way . . . Don't look at yourself. Look at Jesus on the Cross, look at God who loves you, whatever you may be . . . Don't measure your own love, for it is *yours* . . . Measure out the love God has for you, and let yourself be astonished. Don't look back at your own heart and search it again, because all that is *yours* too, and you're wasting time; you won't find anything, or you'll just find consolation, and as for those . . . let's leave them behind . . . Search the Heart of God, which is unfathomable. Submerge yourself in Him, and do not look at or search out anything else.

If you toss a grain of salt into the sea, it disappears, because the salt dissolves into the water, and thus the sea and the grain of salt become one. But if rather than a very tiny grain of salt, you toss in a grain of sand instead . . . the grain of sand will keep being little, and it will be in the sea . . . but it won't dissolve . . . I don't know if I am putting this well . . .

But let's try to be little grains of salt who are dissolved in God, and thus disappear . . . rather than little grains of sand who either sink to the bottom or end up on shore. Don't tell me that you can't . . . All you have to do is let it be done to you . . . let yourself be dissolved.

Don't you go thinking—well, I already know you don't think this—don't you go thinking that I've already achieved this . . . Not at all; I am a dark grain of sand, for I did the same thing you did, I stopped to think about myself a great deal . . . now I have seen the light, and I don't want to remain stopped any longer.

Before, when I placed myself in the presence of God, I saw myself just as you said: little, insignificant, hardly daring to lift my gaze . . . I asked the Lord for humility and self-disgust; I was astonished by my insignificance before God; I saw what little love I had for Him . . . I asked Him to fill me, engulf me, and in His infinite goodness, overlook my wretchedness . . . This consoled me, God coddled me . . . In La Trapa, I considered myself the least and most wretched of the monks, and I thanked the Lord for His kindness . . . and seeing myself this way gave me a quiet consolation: I knew I was beloved of God, despite loving Him so little . . . but what more could I, such a poor creature, the least of all, possibly do? . . .

Now, dear little sister, I still feel the same way, but I see that it's for the best. All that isn't necessary to love God and unite yourself to His Heart . . . It's best for us to dispense with ourselves, so that we can climb toward Him . . . because otherwise, we'll always be stuck thinking about our own humility . . . *Without ceasing* to be humble, without ceasing to be little, let us climb toward Him, so that He can do it all . . .

I don't know if I'm talking nonsense . . . I just write what I feel . . . But if at the beginning of our dialogue with God, we are the ones who speak, there does come a moment when we must fall silent . . . and let the Lord speak, and if we do speak, we cease to speak of ourselves . . . for the same humility we had at the beginning now *prevents* us from focusing on ourselves.



I do indeed understand the joy of your littleness . . . my dear sister. I do indeed understand how your insignificance before God could be a consolation to your soul . . . But I'll say that while you ought not to stop feeling little and weak, you shouldn't stop to think about it too much, because that would be stopping to think about a creature, yourself, and since you are worthless . . . Just leave it be, and instead of your littleness, consider God's greatness. Instead of your wretchedness, consider God's virtues . . . Instead of your little love for the Lord, consider the immense, magnificent love He has for you.

If you consider yourself, even if it's to weep over your ingratitude or your sins or your wretchedness . . . Let us not gather flowers. Don't you agree?

Everything I'm saying to you right now, I'm also saying to myself. This isn't a sermon or a lesson I'm trying to give you; God forbid . . . These are simply some written reflections I'm sending you in case they can be useful to you in some way. Don't take it to mean anything else. Perhaps it would be best if you didn't even take me into consideration at all, because I haven't consulted anyone about this, nor do I have any relevant experience, nor am I being guided by anything except a great desire to love God the best way I can . . . the least human way possible . . . To love Him and deny myself. To love Him as nobody else has ever loved Him before.

Maybe I'm talking nonsense . . . Forgive me, I'm not trying to lay down any doctrine here . . . I'm telling you right now, I am small and I can't do anything . . . other than desire to love God.

May the Most Blessed Virgin come to my aid. During my Rosary the other day, She was the one who delighted me with these thoughts and inspired me to share them

with you . . . You know how I am. On the one hand, I don't want consolations, and on the other hand, I am seeking them by confiding in you . . . Anyway, God sees all.

I'll just say that I pray the Lord sanctifies you through your littleness.

There was so much to respond to in your letter, which I will do another day. I wouldn't know how to respond today. I'll just say that I've already started preparing for December 8 . . . I'll tell you what we're going to offer the Most Blessed Virgin very soon.<sup>644</sup>

I haven't written my grandmother yet . . . I'm more focused now . . . Your letters are my only occupation during this liturgical season . . . but they have provided me with meditation, both in receiving your letters and in answering them . . . so long as we use them to discuss the love of God. Don't you agree? . . . And you help me so much through your letters! May God reward you.

I very much unite myself to you during your prayer times. I pray at approximately the same times you do, and every morning from eleven o'clock onward; today I prayed from twelve to one o'clock . . . But at seven I always remember you when I pray the *Salve*.

There were so many things I wanted to tell you, but I don't know . . .

After reading over this letter . . . well, I don't know what you're going to think . . . But you have to be completely honest with me . . . in case I am mistaken.

Forgive your poor brother, who sends you all his affection, along with his love for God and Mary,

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<sup>644</sup> December 8 is the feast of the Immaculate Conception.

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*Brother María Rafael*

*O.C.R.*

As for all your affairs . . . of course, I hold them very close . . . God knows, but I have great confidence . . . You'll see, little sister, the Virgin will fix everything . . . Don't worry.

My next letter will be longer.

**79. Texts written by Rafael in his copy  
of the Little Office of the Blessed Virgin Mary<sup>645</sup>**

Most Blessed Virgin Mary: When the Lord places the words of David<sup>646</sup> in my mouth, bring them to heaven pure and unblemished, not sullied by my unclean lips, which are not worthy to speak them. Ensure that my prayer is answered . . . I offer it to You so that You might present it to the Lord . . . Purify my intention . . . pardon my faults . . . and thus, as my feeble praise passes through Your most pure hands, You will miraculously transform it into the purest of songs to delight Jesus, and He will deign to hear me.

I hope for everything through You . . . for who am I to dare to ask for anything? But if You intercede for me . . . then there's nothing I won't dare to ask for.

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<sup>645</sup> These annotations date roughly to the second half of 1935 (OC 482). For the Little Office, see Dedication 24. Rafael's edition would have been the copy he received as a monk (*Officium Parvum Beatae Virginis Officiumque Defunctorum auctoritate RR. Domini Sebastiani Abbatis Generalis Ordinis Cisterc. Reformatorum B. M. V. de Trappa editum* [Westmalle, Belgium: ex typographia Ordinis Cist. Reform. B. M. V. de Trappa, 1897]). See Juan Antonio Martínez Camino, *Mi Rafael: el Beato Rafael Arnáiz, según el Padre Teófilo Sandoval, su confesor, intérprete y editor* (Bilbao: Desclée de Brouwer, 2003), 207.

<sup>646</sup> The Little Office is comprised of the Psalms, traditionally ascribed to King David.

And how could You not hear my prayer, knowing how much Your poor Trappist loves You so?

Oh sweet Virgin Mary! Pray for me, and for all sinners like me. Don't forget, Mother, that I am Your son, though I am the littlest.

*Brother María Rafael O.C.R.*<sup>647</sup>

Lord, Your servant is waiting!<sup>648</sup>

Wait for me, Virgin Mary. Humble yourself before the Virgin . . . Consider the sins you have committed as you prayed the Office; ask for the grace to pray it better tomorrow than you did today. Ask that She perceive neither your words nor your composure, but rather the heart of Her poor servant Rafael, who, while a sinner, has left it at the feet of his Mother Mary, so that through Her intercession She might bring it to Jesus.<sup>649</sup>

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<sup>647</sup> This prayer was written on the inside front cover.

<sup>648</sup> See 1 Sam 3:10 and Luke 2:29. This line was written on the page immediately preceding Compline, or Night Prayer.

<sup>649</sup> This prayer was written on the page immediately following Compline, or Night Prayer.

**80. To his mother, Mercedes Barón Torres<sup>650</sup>**

Oviedo, December 2, 1935

My dearest mother,

There is only one thing I'd like you to put into your prayer of the Office: love for Mary. Don't worry about anything else. She will make up for whatever is lacking . . . She will present both your tears and your joys to Jesus . . .

She will gather up your praise for God, and will see nothing in you but great tenderness toward Herself. Don't worry if your song to the Lord is not as lofty as you'd like it to be. Mary will be the one to present it to Him, and that is enough for Him to be pleased to accept it.

My dearest mother, those of us who are little and weak need help to make our prayer pure . . . and Mary does just that . . . the Virgin looks on us from heaven and sees our faults and our flaws, but at the same time, seeing our love, She does away with all that, presenting our feeble petitions zealously before God.

Love the Virgin dearly, and that will help you love God. That is my prayer as the littlest among Her children, and the oldest among yours,

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<sup>650</sup> Rafael had already written a dedication in his mother's copy of the Little Office of the Blessed Virgin Mary (see Dedication 24). He wrote this one in his own copy, which he gave to her, having practically memorized it himself (Juan Antonio Martínez Camino, *Mi Rafael: el Beato Rafael Arnáiz, según el Padre Teófilo Sandoval, su confesor, intérprete y editor* [Bilbao: Desclée de Brouwer, 2003], 213).

Addington 423

*Brother María Rafael, O.C.R.*

## 81. to María Osorio

Oviedo, December 4, 1935

J-H-S

My dearest sister,

I'll hardly have time to write you today, because I have to go to Gijón<sup>651</sup> this afternoon, and I have to go to the doctor shortly, and then I'll go make my visit<sup>652</sup> . . . Anyway, making the most of every minute, I shall begin to answer your letter now.

I don't know where to begin . . . There is so much inside me . . . Well, first of all, I'll tell you that what you said about the Virgin did indeed make me laugh . . . If only I knew; but look, all the contradictions I share with you aren't for everybody . . . Besides, that would be very difficult, although if it were to make someone love the Virgin more . . . I don't know, maybe I could do something . . . And I did have this thought: when I'm in La Trapa, I'll suggest this to Father Abbot, and surely he'll permit me to write. At La Trapa, at Mary's feet, taking my time, I'll write to the Virgin about everything that occurs to me that would be worth reading . . . I'll send you the drafts, and if you think it's good, it can be published under the name "a Cistercian, a son of Mary," that's all.

That way I'll achieve two things at once: I'll be able to keep helping you, and I'll also be able to make known the glories of Mary, which is an obligation of all Trappists. What do you think?

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<sup>651</sup> *Gijón*: A port city near Rafael's hometown of Asturias.

<sup>652</sup> *Visit*: That is, Rafael's daily hour of Adoration.



Despite all this, the idea does make me laugh . . . but no matter, I'll be the littlest of Mary's sons . . . but when it comes to Her, there's nothing I won't do. Although it's precisely when I want to write to the Virgin that I can't think of anything to say. I assure you, nothing can be expected of me, I know myself well enough on this subject . . .

Anyway, Father Abbot will laugh when I tell him, "Look, Reverend Father, I know I can't write to my family, but let me write to Our Lady . . ." And then, during my free time, I'll set about writing to the Virgin in the form of letters, or whatever She inspires me to do, and if they let me, I'll send them to you; you can edit them and do whatever you want with them . . .

If only there were something I could really do for Mary . . . If only you knew, I owe Her everything . . . my vocation, and my health, be it poor or excellent, I tend to it for God's sake and for Mary's . . . And listen, many years ago, before I went off to La Trapa, I fell into a certain sin, and the Most Blessed Virgin was the only reason I didn't hit rock bottom. She rescued me miraculously from the place I was in . . . And it's not that She revealed Herself to me somehow . . . no. But when I saw how much further I could have fallen, and how close I was to doing so, and the extraordinary way that the Lord held me back, I *understood*, without knowing why, but I *felt* somehow, that it was the Most Blessed Virgin who had done this . . . Then later, in La Trapa, She showered me with graces, some of which I've already shared with you . . . In short, Our Lady has influenced my spiritual life in a very special way, and I wouldn't even deserve to breathe if I weren't grateful.

I have to go now. Talk to you later!

Today, December 5, I continue . . . I'm a bit frustrated, because listen, yesterday after I stopped writing you, I couldn't get anything done. I spent the whole morning at the doctor's, then I went to Gijón with my father . . . Essentially, I didn't pray at all . . . You won't believe it, but I don't have time to do anything. I wanted you to get this letter today . . . But that wasn't possible . . . Nothing to be done about that . . . I wanted to answer your letter point by point, but I don't know. In your letter, I see the Most Blessed Virgin, who is guiding you. I have nothing more to say.

As for what you plan to do every day, I don't think you need to change a thing . . . Such questions you ask me! When I received your letter, I went to go see a Carmelite priest to ask him for one, because I left the one I used to have at La Trapa<sup>653</sup> . . . He's going to give it to me today, and I'll do the same thing at the same times as you . . . and I'll offer it all up so that the Most Blessed Virgin uses it for whatever is *needed*. I believe some of it will come your way.

Don't you worry about me . . . I am completely happy, I assure you . . . If I talked of my sacrifice in my most recent letters, I was just being selfish . . . There's no such sacrifice, and now I'm ashamed of having said that to you . . . How ungenerous I am . . . blessed be God . . . Anyway, He knows better than I do what is going on inside me . . . and in my struggle, which I cannot deny, I almost realize . . . He is helping me so much.

The other day, the devil disturbed me. It was terribly cold and rainy, a fearful night . . . When I climbed into my soft bed, in my warm room, not at all hungry, smoking my cigarette . . . I was afraid of what awaits me . . . It's so different there . . . my nature

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<sup>653</sup> Here, Rafael is most likely referring to an instrument of physical penance (OC 487).

often rebels . . . I fly unto Mary and everything else passes away. God permits such temptations, but I assure you, they are few and far between . . .

Don't worry about whether or not they cause me to suffer . . . I am very happy, but nevertheless, I am counting the days and the hours. On other occasions, like when I was home last, time flew incredibly rapidly . . . I don't know, it all blurs together . . . But in the middle of all that is Jesus, my Jesus of Nazareth, and I forget everything else . . . I don't want to think about myself . . . May God reward your great charity toward me in wanting to alleviate some of what I am going through . . . I receive that *desire* of yours, I place it at the feet of Jesus, and that is of enormous help to me . . . I am so lonely, I don't know how to thank you for the encouragement you give me in your letters . . . Anyway: God alone.

You were right about what you said in your letter about the consolation I'll have at La Trapa, and how my brothers will help me . . . I don't know what I'd said in my letter. Don't pay me any mind, sometimes I don't even know what I'm talking about.

Lord, Lord, how could I be so selfish!

Forgive me, dear sister. You still don't know me completely, and perhaps you're the one who has the wrong idea about me . . . It doesn't matter. God sees all.

On December 8, God willing, we will renew our offering to the Lord of all that we are and all that we have . . . We'll offer Him once more the flowers along our paths . . .

I'm sending you this drawing of mine so that you remember.<sup>654</sup> It's worthless, it's not as good as I'd like it to be . . . but it summarizes this whole period of time, at least as far as I'm concerned . . . Let us keep moving forward, without turning our heads to the side, totally stripped of everything, not looking at ourselves. With our eyes fixed on the Cross . . . the path is so short, isn't it? Who cares about anything else?

Yes, little sister, yes, let's hurry up and become saints. Let's prepare ourselves so that when the Bridegroom arrives, our lamps will be lit<sup>655</sup> . . . Let's not focus on anything else.

I'm getting a shrine ready for Jesus, and I don't know what it's going to look like yet, but I do know that I'm preparing it with *impatient love* . . . My Jesus is taking so long to arrive . . . ! This wait is so long! . . . But for the one who truly loves, waiting is so sweet. Isn't it?

What a great consolation, Lord; oh, how I love You, and how You love me . . . How shameful it is to fear everything that sacrifice represents, when You, O Lord, came into this world naked, cold, helpless, and persecuted . . . how shameful . . . and I,

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<sup>654</sup> On the front of the holy card that Rafael sent María, he drew a forest scene and inscribed the words of Saint John of the Cross: "Seeking my Love / I will head for the mountains and for watersides, / I will not gather flowers, / nor fear wild beasts; / I will go beyond strong men and frontiers" (*Collected Works*, 471); see Letter 70. On the back, he wrote her a note; see Dedication 83.

<sup>655</sup> See the parable of the ten virgins, Matt 25:1–3.

meanwhile . . . How I love You, O Lord. I won't know what to say to You this Christmas, I won't be able to . . . I'll have to be quiet.

Little sister, will we truly receive Him well? Look, He is capable of coming down here just for us, that's how much He loves us . . . How good is Jesus . . . What a shame that the world doesn't know it. Will we make up for all the love that the world lacks? . . . Let us pray to Mary for exactly this . . . Let us help the Virgin in the stable . . .

Oh, little sister, how many things we could do! How dull we are, how pitiable . . . Our longing is so strong, while we are so little . . . God . . . Jesus, Mary, do we know what we are saying? . . . No. We have merely an idea, and we don't know how to love, not even a little. How pitiable we are . . .

Little Jesus . . . Child Jesus, I love you so! Permit me to spend this Christmastide curled up in a little corner of the stable. There, quiet, without the noise of drums or tambourines, I'll sing you sweet, tender carols from the bottom of my poor heart, all covered in wounds and misery . . . but during this time of Advent, You'll fix it up . . . You'll see, Jesus, I'm going to be so good . . . we won't let the world notice, but I'm going to love You so much more.

I want to have such affection for You . . . You are so good, and You love me so much, just as . . . just as I am . . . I don't understand it, good Jesus . . . It doesn't matter, I don't know how I am, it doesn't matter. I know that You are coming down from heaven to Mary's womb, and that You are coming in order to accompany me during my life on this earth . . . In order to console me, heal me, help me present myself to the Father . . . How good You are, my Jesus . . . The Virgin loves You so; see how She lulls You to sleep in Her arms, and how Her heart burns with love of You . . .

Lord, permit me to place my poor soul and feeble heart alongside those of Mary . . . may She impart to me Her tenderness and immense affection for You . . . I don't know what I am asking. I'm crazy . . . I want to love You so much, my good Child . . . Allow me to prepare the way for You . . . I want to clear away the pebbles and mud that Your divine feet are to tread . . . I want You to find in me what You cannot find among men, who offend You with their sins, who do not know You . . . whom You call, but who do not listen . . . I want my heart to be your stable . . . What madness. Lord, forgive me . . . Just let me stay in the corner . . . for I don't know what I am saying, nor what I am asking . . . I want to love You so! . . .

How pitiable I am, dear sister . . . don't pay me any mind. Jesus gives us so much that we'd go crazy trying to pay Him back, don't you think?

It's twelve o'clock now. I'm going to pray the *Angelus*, and then I'm going to pray until one o'clock. Then I'll continue writing for a little bit.

I just got back from my visit with the Lord at the Handmaids' convent.<sup>656</sup> I went to tell Him everything I've been telling you in this letter . . . Time flew.

I dedicated the holy card I'm sending to you before I left the house, and afterwards, when I was walking through the streets, I was absorbed in thought about what I'd written . . . and I didn't take anything else in. "Love . . . love," I repeated. I went to church to see God . . . "Love . . . love . . ." propelled me there. I had an urge to go to the Tabernacle . . . and I went.

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<sup>656</sup> *Handmaids*: See Letter 72.

I'll stop here; they just gave me your letter . . . I don't know what to do . . . Well, yes I do: I'm going to pray a *Salve* to Mary, and *humbly* tell my father about this. I'll do it for love of God and you two.

The Virgin loves you both very much, don't worry; my father will do whatever he can . . . Now, permit me to say a few words to Uncle Polín. Your letter may have been "material," as you said, but it was just as useful to me as the rest . . . You did very well in placing this confidence in me . . . That's how things should be between brother and sister.

Now I'm off to scold Uncle Polín on my father's behalf.

All my love, your brother,

*Brother María Rafael*

**82. to Leopoldo Barón**

Oviedo, December 5, 1935

J-H-S

Dearest Uncle Polín,

I've taken away Aunt María's title of "aunt," and now I call her my "sister" . . . with your permission, I'll do the same to you . . . It may not be as respectful, but when I call you my "brother" too, apparently I come to love you more . . . Will you accept? . . . Well then, my dearest brother, I received your letter . . . since you didn't say anything to me, I don't have anything to respond to.

I gave the letter to my father to read. He and I are now closer than ever, and I have a greater confidence with him . . . It upset him, because he is very worried about all your affairs, and he told me to tell you that you're a fool. But as you know, he's always . . . well, he regards you exactly as he should, and in that sense he regrets that you didn't write him sooner, telling him all this and explaining everything . . . because even if he can't solve everything for you, at least he could have sent something your way. And above all, as a brother, he would have sent you some comfort.

Write to him, brother. He deserves it. You ought to place your confidence in my father; don't think of it as a humiliation . . . You already know, and I say this on my father's behalf, that you don't need to knock on our door, it's always open to you . . .

I knew your situation then, just as I do now, and if I didn't say anything to him before, well . . . it's also because I know his situation. But look, everything can be resolved if we have charity toward one another.



He told me that he'd absolutely send you a thousand *pesetas* in the next day or two . . . He wants to send you more, but he doesn't have any more than that, especially now, at year's end . . . Well, write him yourself, don't be childish.

I've been thinking of you so much during your stay in Toro. I don't know what you've learned there, but if you haven't learned to love God more . . . you haven't done anything at all.

With all my affection, and in the Most Blessed Virgin Mary, your brother,

*Brother María Rafael*

*O.C.R.*

P.S. We haven't said anything to my mother . . . My father doesn't want to . . . You know how she is . . . He said he wants to handle this mess on his own . . . and we should hide *everything* from Mamá for now . . . Her soul deserves some rest . . . don't you think? . . . Besides, if she could do anything . . . All this will do is overwhelm her, and you know how she is . . . so very like my grandmother.

**83. Dedication of a holy card**

**to María Osorio**

Oviedo, December 5, 1935

J-H-S

Onward . . .

Onward . . .

Onward . . . , without turning our gaze,

with our eyes on the Cross of Christ, and our hearts aflame with Love.

Onward, without turning our gaze . . . Love won't let us stop . . . Don't look at the flowers, or the beasts, or even the path . . . Look at nothing but God's Love awaiting us on the Cross, and behind that Cross, Mary.

Onward . . .

Onward . . . with no other light or guide than

Love . . .

Love . . .

Love . . .

*Brother María Rafael, O.C.R.*



BUSCANDO MIS AMORES,  
 IRE POR ÉSOS MONTES Y RIBERAS  
 NI COGERE LAS FLORES,  
 NI TEMERE LAS FIERAS,  
 Y PASARE LOS FUERTES Y  
 FRONTERAS.

(San Juan de la Cruz)

Fig. 3<sup>657</sup>

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<sup>657</sup> Text: “Seeking my Love / I will head for the mountains and for watersides, / I will not gather flowers, / nor fear wild beasts; / I will go beyond strong men and frontiers” (John of the Cross, *Collected Works*, 471). Image: Antonio Cobos Soto, *La pintura mensaje del Hermano Rafael: Estudio crítico de la obra pictórica del venerable Rafael Arnáiz Barón, monje trapense* (Burgos: Monte Carmelo, 1989), 213.

## 84. to María Osorio

Oviedo, December 7, 1935

J-H-S

My dearest sister,

I thought about writing you this afternoon, but I didn't have the opportunity. Now that it's eleven o'clock at night, I'll begin.

I suppose you'll have received my last letter, which I thought would be longer, but since I wanted it to go out that same day, and besides I couldn't think of anything to say . . . I can't remember if I even said goodbye . . . If only you knew how upset I am over what is happening to you, and not being able to fix it . . . God has tied my hands . . . and evidently that's for the best, because being able to help would be too much of a consolation for me.

Today I went to go see the Lord and pray for you. When I left the church, my father very mysteriously approached me, gave me a thousand *pesetas*, and said . . . "Take this, don't tell anybody, and send it to your aunt and uncle. As you know, this is all I can do for now . . ." I kissed his hand, and I happily sent them your way after lunch.

I know it's not enough, but don't focus on the amount, but rather on the affection and intention behind it . . . I assure you, my father is very sorry for what you're going through. Well, *sursum corda*.<sup>658</sup> You'll see, everything will be resolved . . . I see the Virgin's hand in it, and surely She will not abandon you. Now you'll have your "daily

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<sup>658</sup> *Sursum corda*: "Lift up your hearts" (see Letter 63).

bread” for a while, and nothing more. But what about God? Do you believe He will leave you? Nonsense. I am confident that He will not; be at peace.

You’ll say yes, well, all that’s very well and good . . . but. Well, my dear sister, there’s no “but” about it. I don’t say that just to comfort you . . . but because I truly feel that way, and since I can’t send you any material support to ease the situation, I am sending you . . . well, you already know what. If only you knew, I have so much confidence in God!

You say that your horizons are narrowing . . . What does that matter? The horizon of earthly things . . . that’s a small and limited horizon . . . Don’t go drowning in it . . . Look, on the holy card I sent you (if I can call it that), the Cross is not on the horizon, but rather *much higher up*. Am I making sense? . . . So look at the Cross, look at Jesus hanging on it . . . Don’t let earthly things overwhelm you. Your horizons aren’t important . . . Jump over the horizon . . . and if it seems that everything is narrowing, don’t believe it. The good Jesus will always make an opening for you, wherever you see Him . . . You’ll see His attentive care, His love. You’ll see Mary, and even amid the darkest storms this world can bring, if you lift your eyes to Mary . . . you’ll find something there. Isn’t that so, little sister?

Don’t worry; you’ll see, everything will be resolved. I am sure of it.

The clock just struck midnight. It is now December 8, the Virgin’s feast day. I hope you both have a very happy day. I’m sure you won’t forget to pray for my poor soul at communion . . . I promise, I won’t forget to pray for yours . . . I’m going to dedicate the whole day to the Virgin Mary as best as I can. I don’t know how I’ll manage, because I’m totally inept, but anyway . . . the Lord sees me. I won’t worry about anything else.

I'm glad that you understood my letter. I'm telling you, after I read it, I thought about starting it over . . . But then I thought about it some more, and I just sent it. As I've told you before, I write down everything that comes to mind, and I don't censor myself . . . I do so in the name of the Virgin; may She be the one who guides me.

I'm so pleased that Uncle Polín is with you in Ávila again. I can assure you, I didn't want him to stay in Toro much longer . . . No longer than necessary . . . That wasn't good for anyone . . . For that, you need to be holy . . . Anyway, such trials are sent by the Lord . . . So then, may they come.

He promised to write me; I hope he will. I have so little time left in the world . . . and when I go back to La Trapa, I'll just have one little thorn left piercing me, and that's you two . . . Of course, I am not leaving you in a good financial situation, but I carry with me the consolation of having done what I could . . . above all, of your having a greater devotion to the Virgin . . . That almost worries me even more . . . Blessed be God, I'm growing so tiresome.

I'm laughing right now . . . I figure you'll laugh too, in a few years' time, thinking about your poor little brother and how he couldn't talk about anything else . . . I must have uttered so much nonsense in these letters these past few months, talking to you about God and Mary . . . but I can't help it. I don't know if this will just be a passing phase . . . I don't think so. But these letters have been helping me so much, especially during this time, when I desperately need it.

Did you like what I wrote on the back, from Saint John of the Cross?<sup>659</sup> . . . You already knew that passage, didn't you?

I want to make another one for Uncle Polín one of these days, but I don't know if I'll manage . . . He's very . . . very difficult to please.

Listen, what I want to send you in this letter is a great deal of joy . . . So much joy, in order to love God amid everything that is happening to you . . . Besides, no one can be sad today . . . Of course, there must be great joy in heaven today . . . Who must be there? . . . All the generations of angels singing to Mary . . . Mary looking at the Son . . . The Father looking at Mary, being glorified in Her, loving Himself in loving the Virgin . . . The Holy Spirit . . .

Well, I've gotten myself into a bit of a mess. But anyway, all of heaven is celebrating, and in the middle is Our Lady, who doesn't forget about us little maggots who are still stuck on earth just because She is in heavenly glory . . . Everything is to be joyous in heaven today; Mary will very lovingly hear everything we ask of Her.

Oh, little sister! How is it possible that, knowing this is not our homeland, we still remain worried that our horizons are shrinking? . . . How is it possible that, looking up at heaven just a little bit, we remember only that we are still here on earth? . . .

Blessed be God, who has not yet called us to participate in heaven's festival of love for the Virgin . . . But Lord, tarry not . . . even if you find us selfish, even if you know that it would be more perfect for us not to desire anything at all . . . But Lord, how is it possible not to want to be in heaven already, with body and soul and everything else,

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<sup>659</sup> See Dedication 83.

at once . . . to be where we will see You . . . where we won't sin . . . where we will praise the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and adore the Most Blessed Virgin Mary . . . where we won't be separated from Her ever again? . . . And you still keep us down here, *where everything is an obstacle to enjoying You.*

But anyway, it doesn't matter . . . we'll just act as if we were already there, and God had sent us back down here for just a little longer. We'll make heaven here on earth . . . glory within our own hearts . . . Make room for the Virgin and Jesus and the saints there . . . We'll unite ourselves to the angels . . . We'll sing just like them . . . We'll celebrate too . . . We'll jump for joy at the mere thought of the glory given to God by the Immaculate Virgin.

How could we keep from rejoicing? . . . We're just here for a short time, I'm sure of it . . . Let's make use of every moment. Let's love God dearly . . . love Mary dearly . . . look to heaven . . . sing . . . go crazy . . .

Forgive me . . . I always do this, I always end up talking nonsense . . . And this topic, it's no wonder.

Tell me what you did for the Virgin today, on this feast of the Immaculate Conception.

Today we'll have Uncle Alfonso and Aunt Regina over for dinner . . . Of course I won't have any time to write, except for a little bit in the morning. It's one o'clock now,



so I'm going to leave it here . . . My brothers will be up in less than an hour,<sup>660</sup> and I want to help them a bit, and I want them to help me . . . am I making sense?

Today is no ordinary day. Since, in my Trapa, feasts are celebrated differently than they are in the world . . . and I am a Trappist who is in the world, what I'll do is unite myself to the Trappists during the night . . . and spend the day in the world . . . Although I think I'll be united to them during the day too . . . in choir, at the Hours . . . and even though I'll be talking and laughing . . . I'll be united to their silence, too . . .

Don't you go thinking that it's somewhat difficult for me to pay attention to everything while my spirit is so far away . . . It doesn't matter, She is helping me . . . What do I care? I won't be able to sing her solemn Vespers, but I'll listen to Uncle Alfonso's jokes, and in return . . . I'll make some of my own.

Oh, dear little sister! How pleasant it is to love Mary, nothing is difficult with Her . . . Everything turns out well, everything is easy, even being holy. I believe that if we decide on something, and we tell Her about it, She will do it for us.

When I go to communion in the morning, I'm going to tell Jesus that we want to be very good, and that we're counting on the Immaculate Virgin to make it happen.

Anyway, I'll leave it there for tonight . . . Now I'm going to tell the Lord to help us all tomorrow morning, so that we can do something for Mary's glory.

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<sup>660</sup> *My brothers*: That is, the Trappists at San Isidro de Dueñas, who would rise at 1:00 am on feast days (OC 498).

It's now eleven o'clock in the morning. I went to the eight o'clock Mass with my father to take communion. Afterwards, my father and I went to the cathedral for the Papal Blessing.<sup>661</sup>

Shortly, I'll go mail this letter, and then I'll make my Visit<sup>662</sup> . . . And then, I don't know what will become of me. As I mentioned, we have a family gathering.

I'm expecting a letter from Ávila today. Will I get one?

My mother is leaving messages over the telephone . . . My cousins are arriving now.<sup>663</sup> I'll have to leave you for today . . . I'm surrounded by noise. *Sursum corda*. All for Mary.

Give Uncle Polín a big hug for me. All my affection, your brother, who also longs to send you all the affection he has for the Virgin

*Brother María Rafael O.C.R.*

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<sup>661</sup> *Papal Blessing*: Bishops may impart a blessing on behalf of the Pope three times a year on important feast days, such as, in this case, the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception.

<sup>662</sup> *Visit*: i.e., to the Blessed Sacrament.

<sup>663</sup> *My cousins*: The five children of Alfonso Barón Torres and Regina González-Tablas: Álvaro, Fernando, José María, Teresa, and Amelia (OC 499).

## 85. to María Osorio

Oviedo, December 10, 1935

J-H-S

My dearest sister,

With the help of Jesus and Mary, I will begin this letter.

I'll start by saying that I go through the same thing you do . . . I never know where to begin when telling you everything within me . . . We'll go point by point . . . I have your letter in front of me, fully marked up in red pencil.<sup>664</sup>

Right now it's midnight . . . I can't find another time to write . . . I'm telling you, I spend all day busy with a thousand different things . . . Today, for example, in the morning I have to accompany my mother to the prison in order to visit a prisoner who wrote her, asking for her help . . . I'm sure something can be done for him . . . Then I have to go to the Carmelite monastery<sup>665</sup> . . . I might have to go to Infiesto with my

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<sup>664</sup> "After reading your letters a few times, I use a red pencil to mark out the parts I think I can reply to" (Letter 73).

<sup>665</sup> The Monastery of Our Lady of Carmel (*Monasterio de Nuestra Santísima Madre del Carmen*), a community of Carmelite nuns, was then located at the intersection of Calle Muñoz Degraín and Calle Sacramento, Oviedo. The community relocated to Barrio Toleo, Oviedo, in 1980 (Carolina G. Menéndez, "Sabores monacales" [*La Nueva España* Aug. 26, 2012]).

father, then later I have my Visit with the Lord . . . Anyway, you can see that I don't have any time. That's why I'm more able to collect myself at these late hours.

Look, sister, when you said in your letter that you'd simply follow whatever I told you to do . . . Honestly, I don't know what to do . . . You've put me in a tight spot. It's one thing for me to share with you all the reflections that come to mind. . . but please don't take them literally . . . even though you say that you think I am very much walking in the truth . . . keep in mind who I am . . . And now I am not looking at myself, but rather you are the one who should look at me . . . I am telling you this as I see it . . . Pay me the *appropriate amount* of attention. Remember, I have no experience; don't go thinking otherwise.

I'm a little afraid of what you said about simply following my advice . . . Nothing like this has ever happened to me before. I only ever wanted to influence you in one matter: loving God and Mary more . . . When it comes to that, absolutely . . . But when it comes to telling you what is most perfect! . . . Maybe I could tell you, but you shouldn't heed my answer without first consulting someone else about it . . . Remember, little sister, who is telling you all this! No, this is not false modesty . . . All I'm doing is telling you everything that comes to mind . . . but always from my limited perspective . . . I am sharing my reflections and meditations with you, that's all, and since I love God very much, I want you to love Him . . . perhaps the ways we love Him will be different . . . but I believe that when it comes to love for God, we should all be equal, for its expressions are the same, and so too the feelings it inspires. Don't you think so? Well, I don't want to go on too long about this.

Now what I'm going to do is *forgive you*. Listen, I'm laughing about this . . . you poor thing. Let's see if you pay me any mind now . . . don't you ever put the phrase "forgive me" in one of your letters ever again . . . I've been a bad example for you in this regard, saying it to you too . . . but I think there's no need. Don't you agree? What do I have to forgive you for? Because you're suffering and you tell me about it? . . . Why should you feel bad for sharing your hardships with me? On the contrary, you should greatly rejoice, if indeed you find consolation in me . . . You poor little thing, what do I have to forgive you for? On the contrary, you give me so much consolation.

Those who are *truly* brothers and sisters, listen carefully, those who *truly* are . . . don't notice such things. We ought to place our confidence in God, but we are still on this earth, and the desire to leave creatures behind isn't meant to be . . . Don't go thinking that you're mixing in anything human here, because *everything* can be *divinized* . . . suffering and joy alike. Everything, absolutely everything, can point us to God . . . and for the one who lives according to His holy law, everything he does, thinks, says, and experiences—he does, thinks, says, and experiences for God and in God.

Look, I'm going to be direct: if I didn't love God, I wouldn't care very much about whether or not you loved Him, or whether you were suffering on this or that account . . . *I'd just be yet another relative*. I don't know if I'm talking nonsense, but since I love you with God's love and for His sake . . . unselfishly, in the love of Christ . . . everything you tell me, all your human and material affairs, point me to God and are placed in Him. I want nothing more than to help you, *with whatever you might need*. If I had economic resources, and could tell you in a worldly way, "Take it, Aunt María, don't worry . . ." To the world, that would be the human thing to do . . . but for us, it would be

different . . . It would go like this: “Take it, sister, in the name of Jesus through Mary.”

See how everything can be transformed in the name of Jesus and through His love?

Besides, it would be another thing if you were to deceive me . . . and why would you? Besides, you aren't deceiving me, because as long as we are on this earth, everything will be a struggle . . . A struggle between matter and spirit . . . Right now, that struggle is coming to a head in both of us, each in our own way . . . You said to me: “Everything is closing in on me, I have to suffer humiliations and I resist them . . . I am suffering in the dark, and earthly things are tormenting me . . .” And in my own way, I say just the same thing to you. But both of us help each other to raise our eyes to Mary, we encourage each other to be holy, to struggle faithfully and confidently, to place ourselves at the Virgin's feet . . . to cease thinking of ourselves.

Listen, let's do this: everything you see in my letters that you think is “human,” you can make it holy . . . Or rather, “de-humanize” it . . . I'll do the same thing.

It's all the same to me. Tell me everything, and unburden yourself . . . It's as if you had a bundle of heavy, useless things that are weighing you down, and you give them to your brother so you can rest . . . I'm sure you'll be more calm once you've written me . . . you'll love the Lord more . . .

I don't know how to express everything that I'm feeling. Maybe that's very “human” of me, but God loves me just like this . . . In one of your letters, you told me that you wanted to be a saint, but a human saint; I understood. So understand what I'm saying now.

So everything I send you that is “creaturely,” return it to me in God and in love of God. I’ll do the same . . . Do you remember the reading at Sext?<sup>666</sup> Little sister, don’t be silly. If we were already saints, our correspondence wouldn’t be necessary. It’s very beautiful to want to leave creatures behind and be left with God alone, but it’s also beautiful to bring creatures with us, whether to help them or to help ourselves.

Look, in La Trapa, we love another in this way . . . We love one another in Christ, and with the charity of Christ . . . I’m going to give you an example. If one brother sees that another brother is struggling *materially* with work, and helps him, he has performed an act that is *material* in the eyes of men, but divine in the eyes of God.

I remember this one little old man there, almost incapacitated by age, who was in charge of the produce<sup>667</sup> . . . One afternoon he was assigned the task of bringing some baskets of potatoes up from the ground floor, where the kitchen is, to the pantry on the second floor . . .

He took a very long time with each basket . . . He was sweating and panting, he couldn’t do it . . . An oblate happened to pass by, he must have been about twelve years old . . . and without saying anything, he took the old man’s basket and started running up the stairs, after having had to fight the brother for it a bit, because he didn’t want to let go

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<sup>666</sup> *Bear one another’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ (Gal 6:2).*

For *Sext*, see Letter 76.

<sup>667</sup> Brother Pacomio Hernández Sevillano (1859–1936) was in charge of the pantry at San Isidro de Dueñas (OC 503).

. . . The brother went back to try to carry up another basket, and the little oblate came back to try to get the old brother to rest and take it up himself . . .

Then the novices arrived, and we realized what was going on. Between the four of us and the oblates who accompanied us, even though it wasn't time for work, we took all the potatoes up to the pantry for the brother . . . The old brother rejoiced at the novices' charity, and we finished in five minutes what it would have taken him an hour and a half of exhausting effort to do . . . He laughed at the racket we made going up and down the stairs, until he nearly cried . . . That's La Trapa for you.

Every bit of that is human, even the old man's laughter and tears . . . Yes, it's all human, for we do have hearts . . . but God sees charity, He sees His love, for everything is done for Him in La Trapa . . . No one expects a reward, because even though the joy of the poor old man was reward enough . . . even if it weren't, we'd still do the same thing . . . To do otherwise would be selfish. We would be like *whitewashed tombs*.<sup>668</sup>

I don't know if I'm making sense, I think I am . . . And so, I'll say that if I could help you carry your "baskets of potatoes" . . . I absolutely would . . . Tell me how many there are, and how heavy. Tell me if you're getting tired, and I'll lend you a hand from here . . . It's only natural, don't you think?

No, don't you go thinking that selfishness . . . is just honesty . . . Just as the old brother neither hid his exhaustion nor possessed self-love (and I am not implying that you

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<sup>668</sup> *Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which on the outside look beautiful, but inside they are full of the bones of the dead and of all kinds of filth (Matt 23:27).*



do), so too you should not be ashamed or afraid to tell me everything you are going through, everything that comes to mind . . . your sorrows, your difficulties . . . Everything that you think is “human,” but that you can’t leave behind—because for one thing, you’re not yet holy enough for that, and besides, you’re still here on earth, where God has us surrounded with misery and weakness . . . but that’s for the best . . .

There’s no need to be afraid. Love for Jesus of Nazareth does all things, and bears all things . . . Rest, as you said, and tell me everything. If in doing so, you receive some human consolation . . . *it’s not*. When a consolation is received *in the name of God and Mary*, even if it comes through the most vile of all earthly creatures, that consolation comes from God. Don’t reject it, accept it, and please, dear sister, don’t you ever ask for my forgiveness again . . . I won’t ask for yours either. I also rest when I take up my pen and, in one way or another, tell you all my business, my miseries, my love for God.

I don’t know if I’m doing a good or a bad thing by making you a participant in the insights that the Lord gives me . . . Of course, there are many of them, and if I could make you holy, even if I were to stay down here below . . .

How great God is, sister! I’ve said it so many times, and I’ll never get tired of repeating it . . . I’m so pleased that your suffering and your “little agonies” make you cry out to Him, cry out to Him with “loving cries” . . . Suffering brings so much delight when one suffers for Christ . . . The Blessed Cross is our only treasure. I don’t want to take it away from you. If I did, I wouldn’t love you very well.

You asked what happened to me in my last letter . . . I don’t know. I barely remember what I said in it. To be honest, I don’t remember *at all*.

Don't go looking for what isn't there. It's true that sometimes I lose my train of thought and I don't know what I'm saying, but when I sit down to write you, I collect myself, I think a lot about Jesus, and I want to tell you so many things, but I can't.

He absorbs me. I start out talking about Him, and I end up talking to Him . . . I start wanting to send you *everything*, and since *everything* is quite a lot, I don't know what happens to me, and so sometimes, I write things I didn't plan to . . . and what I did plan to write, I *cannot*. I don't know if I'm making sense. It's so difficult to put it into words . . . I have to be careful, and if I start talking about the love of God, the love He has for me, the love I have for Him, I get the urge to say . . . God, love, God . . . etc . . . and fill my letter with these words: "Love for God." . . . Do you know what that is?

Yes, little sister, yes, I've gone mad . . . Don't pay me any mind, but if I let myself get carried away, I'd start a letter . . . and when it occurred to me to talk about God . . . then I'd finish it. Am I making sense? But then I wouldn't be writing you, I'd just be sending you a couple of pages full of the word "love," scribbled loudly, and I wouldn't even be able to sign it. Can you see how much I need to go back to La Trapa? . . . The only thing that's keeping me calm is knowing that I'll be there soon, and when I am, then I'll be able to shout . . . Nobody knows what a Trappist's silence really is . . . especially that of a Trappist who's madly in love with God and the Virgin.

There are so many things I could say . . . so many, but when I come to one of these moments in my letters, I can't say anything at all . . . believe me, it's not that I'm very godly or anything . . . don't you go thinking something that isn't true . . . It's just that I want to send you everything within me, and I'm powerless to do so . . . I can't write, I don't know how . . . I get worked up, and then I fall silent . . . How great God is,

sister. I don't know how we can live like this . . . So many impediments, Lord, so many obstacles between us and enjoyment of You . . . The Bridegroom is long delayed.<sup>669</sup>

While the soul remains imprisoned in the body, everything is a struggle, and we are so weak, so feeble. Blessed be the Lord . . . how great the Lord is. My life has not yet begun . . . I have an idea about what love for God should be . . . and I don't understand how anyone who has loved the Lord has been able to survive . . . Either the Lord sustained the saints, or they never loved God. Don't you think?

Anyway, sister, don't pay me any mind. Just love God as best you know how and as best you can . . . If only you knew . . . yes, you do know what love for God is. You'll see, then nothing in the world will matter at all to you, not even suffering . . . Love God and *nothing* else . . . That's what I'm saying in my letters, in all of them . . . Don't read anything else into them . . . Look, it's just as I said, I start out writing you, and I always end up at Jesus' feet.

Oh, dear sister, how great is that Jesus of Nazareth . . . May He forgive me, not you.

Do you know what time it is? It's three o'clock in the morning! . . . Now I do have to leave you for now . . . I'll continue in the morning. Blessed be God, how mad I am!

Today, December 11, I am continuing. I want to finish today, so that you receive this tomorrow. Today I received your letter . . . and . . . well, nothing. God alone, as you said.

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<sup>669</sup> Matt 25:5.

Don't you go thinking that I'm going to stop writing you . . . Sometimes I'll go on longer, and other times I'll be shorter . . . what does that matter? And don't think that I have to force myself to write you, not at all. I'm not losing sleep over it either, because I always take a *siesta* . . . So don't you worry about that.

What I want is for *you* not to force yourself to write, which you ought not to do, especially when my grandmother and Aunt María are there<sup>670</sup> . . . I'll keep writing you, but even though you are the last consolation that the Lord is offering me in the world before I go back to La Trapa . . . I want to be generous . . . That is, even if you don't write me . . . and even if I never hear from you again this side of heaven, I need not cease to offer what little I can for my part.

Don't wish to clear thorns from my path, as you said you do . . . Then what would I have left to offer the Lord?

Since you asked after my health, I'll just say that I'm in the doctor's hands for now. I told him about my situation and what I'm planning to do . . . He thought it was fine . . . He put me on a very strict diet and told me that for now I need to have a blood sugar level of zero, and then later, in the monastery, my nutrition plan there will probably be enough . . . I'm not worried about my health at all, praise God. My mother says I've gained weight since I started my diet . . . and it's possible.

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<sup>670</sup> Rafael's maternal grandmother, Fernanda Torres, and aunt, María Josefa Barón Torres.

I'm so grateful to you for everything, sister. You're so good to me, and if it didn't bother you, I'd say that over and over again . . . May the Lord and Mary reward you for it.

In your letter, you mentioned a silly thought of yours in regard to what my parents might think . . . Well, what my father might think, since my mother doesn't know anything . . . Well, sister, may God forgive you for being silly . . . since I don't need to forgive you for anything you say to me.

Do you know what I saw in your letter today? I saw that your soul loves God very much. If only you knew how much that consoles me. He is doing this. May He be blessed . . . Someday you'll come to *love Him as you desire to* . . . and then . . . that's when you'll need to remember me . . . I, poor soul, am no longer the one who is helping you . . . He is, He who makes use of anything and everything to accomplish His works . . . What are we? . . .

In your letter, I see a desire to fly to God . . . Waiting to embrace the Bridegroom is taking too long . . . Fly, sister, fly. Look not to us creatures who, as you said, *pass away* while only He remains . . . Run, hurry, don't worry about whether your heart is suffering as you leave bits and pieces of it scattered in the world . . . The world, and creatures, have nothing to give you . . . God alone.

Rise up, rise up, dear little sister. Don't worry about your brother who helped you that one time, in his own way, as the Lord instructed him to do . . . Very soon I won't be able to do anything for you at all, *materially* speaking.

In my corner of La Trapa, I'll pray to the Lord, I'll pray to the Virgin in silence . . . Pray for me too, that the Lord might accept my offering . . . That's what "oblate" means

. . . “offering” . . . I offer myself to Him as I am, whether good or bad, in good health or out of it; I offer Him my life, my body, my soul, my heart, everything . . . absolutely everything.

I have offered myself for everyone: for my parents, my brothers and sisters, missionaries, priests . . . those who are suffering, and those who offend Him . . .

May He make of me what He wills. Pray that the Lord accepts me . . . That is the only way I’ll be able to help you when I am in my monastery . . .

Don’t worry about me . . . Fly to the Lord . . . Rise up into the embrace of that Love for whom you suffer and struggle . . . Think of nothing but Him . . . and you’ll see, the wait won’t seem long at all.

I don’t want your gratitude . . . it ought *not* be directed at me, understand? . . . He’s the one who does it all.

May the Lord be your only light . . . and may that light never be darkened by any shadow . . . or any other soul, no matter how good it may be . . . When you look to heaven, may you see that God who loves you so much, who never needs an excuse or misses an occasion to show Himself to you, even amid the dark night of the soul . . . What does it matter how?

When you look to heaven, may you see God and only God . . . His love . . . There are so many things I want to tell you! I don’t know how, I’m not expressing myself well . . . But as for that nephew of yours, that brother . . . who passed through like a faint shadow and helped you grow closer to God . . . leave him behind, don’t suffer on his account. That is his vocation . . . to desire to be forgotten by the world and by creatures . . . in order to offer himself to God in the silence and humility of an oblate’s habit . . .

He wants to be an offering to God, but without the world taking any notice of him . . . To be a faint shadow who passed through life loving God dearly and quietly . . . To help every soul in the world love God, without their even realizing it . . . Am I making sense? I don't want anything for myself, I desire nothing . . . May the Lord accept me, my renunciation, my sacrifices . . . Pray to Him for this, my dear sister. Perhaps my intentions are not as pure as they ought to be . . . may Mary sanctify them. And if you ever think of me, may it be in order to keep offering me to the Lord . . . and to tell Him, "Look, Jesus, I have a brother over there in La Trapa . . . He's worthless and very little, but despite how little his heart is, he lives for You alone, and he has no other mission than to love You as much as he can, and to *offer*<sup>671</sup> even his own blood, so that everyone else might love You too . . . Accept him, Lord. He offers himself through the Most Blessed Virgin Mary . . . "

Will you do this, sister? In doing so, you'd accomplish two things: offering a soul to God, and helping me. That's no small feat.

Anyway, I don't want to go on . . . I'll just say that: fly, and if you fall, it doesn't matter. Mary is at your side; with Her, you have nothing to fear. Fly to that God whom you *ought* to love madly, without thinking of yourself or anyone else . . . helpless to do anything but love.

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<sup>671</sup> Rafael's emphasis; note his observation above that *oblato* derives from the word *offering*.

Anyway, dear sister, I don't want this letter to go on any longer. Tell Uncle Polín that I'm waiting on his letter; keep me updated about your affairs. How are the children at the orphanage doing?<sup>672</sup> When is my grandmother coming to Ávila?

Fernando is leaving Belgium on the 20<sup>th</sup> to spend Christmas at home.

Anyway, don't you worry about a thing! . . . Make room for heaven within your soul, and during this season, place the Child Jesus in Mary's arms there . . . and quietly sing Him carols . . . Don't worry about anything external . . . Do you not have Jesus in your heart? Then so what? . . . But take note: don't *drop hints* about your interior life, or allow your *detachment* from everything to *show through* . . . It's quite easy to lack charity this way . . . I don't know if I'm making sense . . . Be a saint, but a saint who is present in everything: one who talks, laughs, consoles others . . . Shut yourself away inside with that Jesus you love so much. But . . . I think you understand what I'm saying: invite others to participate in what you have . . . Embark upon everything with charity toward all, even if sometimes you have to strain yourself.

I think I know you in this regard, don't I? . . . Look, this is very important for you; you're a mother . . . am I making sense?

If only you knew how pleasing this is to Jesus . . . To dwell in Him deeply, so deeply within yourself, but at the same time, to externally display . . . humility, charity, tender care for one's neighbor, for all . . . To know how to console, to know how to take care of things, to act in a way that brings creatures to God, not to hide your lamp under a

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<sup>672</sup> María was a benefactor of an orphanage called Nazareth House (OC 456; see also Letters 75 and 87).



bushel basket<sup>673</sup> . . . To maintain holy joy at all times. To be with God in your heart, praying Hail Marys to the Virgin, but at the same time, not to shut yourself away so much that the world *notices* . . . Am I making sense? . . . I'll say it again . . . *given your character*, you could easily lack charity this way . . .

Do you mind that I'm saying this to you? . . . Look, all I want is your good and your perfection . . . and this Christmas, you could do great things . . .

How good God is, to provide the circumstances that allow you to carry out what I'm saying . . . Do you think I'm wrong? Respond to this and tell me if you've understood it.

Sometimes this has happened to me, where when the internal clashes with the external . . . I fail. Sometimes it's a gesture . . . a word . . . a *silence* . . . I've fallen into this many times, and I repent of it . . . We mustn't be this way. We must be saints . . . but human ones, as you said, and in your case, a holy wife, mother, and daughter . . . Am I making sense? . . . I am saying all this because I know you.

Focus on God, and engage with him . . . but focus on God's creatures, and engage with them too . . . If you have to strain yourself at first, don't worry . . . Eventually, it will all come easily to you, because you'll do it in the name of Jesus . . . You'll see, you'll see, this Christmas is going to be great for you. I'll help you as much as I can . . . Don't worry, everything will turn out fine.

Anyway, I won't say anything more . . . "forgive me," that's the last time I'll say that to you . . . But I might actually need your forgiveness for this letter. Read it

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<sup>673</sup> Matt 5:15; Mark 4:21; Luke 8:16; 11:33.

charitably, because I don't know what's in it . . . I repeated so many things, then I contradicted myself . . . Anyway, sometimes I don't know what I'm talking about, but you understand me, and that's enough for me.

I have lots of other things to tell you, and to respond to, but I'll do that another day.

Give Uncle Polín a great big hug for me, and another one for you, as "human" as you'd like, but a very big one regardless. Your brother, who loves you dearly,

*Brother María Rafael O.C.R.*

## 86. to María Osorio

Oviedo, December 15, 1935

J-H-S

My dearest sister,

It's very late at night, but I don't want to put off starting this letter, even though it's going to be short, because I want to make sure it goes out tomorrow. I haven't answered Uncle Polín's letter . . . but I haven't painted the holy card for him yet, and it takes time.

Listen, I read your letter with simplicity, as you asked. Even though I wanted to laugh at some things . . . I don't know what to tell you. You might think that you are nobody, and you don't deserve my attention, and I shouldn't worry . . . but it's not so . . . You are a soul belonging to God. However good and holy you may or may not be . . . you belong to God. Isn't that so? . . .

When you ask me (blessed be God) . . . when you ask me for advice or help . . . when you tell me about your setbacks, your love, your longings, and your misery, it's not you I see . . . I see neither you, María . . . nor my beloved little sister. I don't see a creature, believe me . . . Now, I see only *a soul that belongs to God*, and that's how I want to treat you: as one *belonging to God*. That's how I want to help you: as one belonging to God . . . But at the same time, if only you knew what a spot you've put me in! . . . Or rather, God has . . . I've offered myself to Him so that I might help souls to get to heaven, *as best I can* . . . I believe that the best way I can do that is by offering . . . a bit of silence. Nevertheless, the Lord has placed in my path a soul, your soul, whom I look

at, and He asks me to give her help and advice. He asks *me* . . . Blessed be God, I am nothing, I am nobody, I have no experience, I am without learning, as Saint Teresa said.<sup>674</sup> I say this without false modesty. The Virgin knows it . . .

I see my path as such a simple one . . . absolute love for God, and silence among men.

In your letter, I saw nothing but that one doubt you pointed out. I read between the lines and understand everything that's going on with you . . . You told me to place you under the Virgin's mantle . . . and trust me, that's exactly what I did at the Carmelite chapel this morning.

Could I possibly give you an explanation? I Don't know. If Fr. Torres<sup>675</sup> couldn't answer you . . . I'm sure to do a poor job of it. I ask Our Lady for Her help, that you might understand me.

Listen, my dear little sister. When I left La Trapa, the same thing happened to me that's happening to you . . . I was leaving a supernatural world in order to enter into a material world . . . and when I say a material world, I include even my parents' and my

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<sup>674</sup> "For I am without learning . . . without instruction from a learned man or from any other person . . ." (Saint Teresa of Ávila, *The Book of Her Life* 10.7, in *The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Ávila*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodríguez [Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1976], 1:77).

<sup>675</sup> Father Alfonso Torres Fernández, S.J. (1879–1943), María's confessor at the time (OC 514).

family's affection in that. I don't know if I'm making sense . . . *Everything* would startle me. God was my interior life, and people were my exterior life.

I was leaving my Trapa where, I don't need to tell you, God was both inside and out. And when I had to leave, I flailed about like a fish out of water . . . I know what you are suffering, but listen, in the love for God and the interior life I had before . . . there was so much imperfection, and the Lord wanted to perfect me in that regard . . . I know what you are going through. You think that in order to *immerse yourself in God*, you have to *forget* that you are among creatures . . . and that's not so.

You think that your interior life is in *conflict* with your exterior life . . . and believe me, that conflict exists *now*, but have no doubt that the Virgin will put it right. These are simply trials sent by the Lord, and they're difficult, but they pass.

What would have become of me, if that had not happened? Since my only source of experience with this is my own soul, that's what I'm writing you about . . . You can see if my own case is useful to you in some way with your own situation . . . I can do nothing more.

So anyway, I struggled with that for a long time. If I gave myself fully to my life with God, in God . . . when I came home . . . I would even be in a bad mood after taking Communion, because I'd have to have breakfast and then talk about this or that, I even lacked charity . . . I wanted recollection, and I wanted *others* to collect themselves, so that they could *help me* . . .

Perhaps I'd be coming back from church, thinking about God, longing for my Trapa, and one of my brothers would pester me with something or other . . . I'd want to

give him a rude answer . . . or I'd answer him for real . . . But everything annoyed me on the inside . . .

Other times, I'd find myself all alone, isolated, helpless . . . The world was going its own way, and I was disoriented. I wanted to place my life entirely in God, and I couldn't . . . I thought I had to make a Trapa within my own home . . . and like in the monastery, after receiving the Lord, nobody should talk and everything should help me remain in prayer . . . Such suffering that causes! And sometimes even tears . . . How wrong I was . . . and how wrong I think you are, my dear little sister . . . what doubt can remain that you can give yourself *entirely* to God, and also remain in the world, without letting the world notice *at all*?

I know well the sins you are falling into. God permits them, but you'll see, you'll change.

The Lord made me see, though it took some tears . . . He made me see that I was wrong . . . That I could love Him very much and maintain an intense life in God, but at the same time, I could dwell among creatures with true joy . . . I could invite others to participate in what I carried inside me . . . I could hide God away inside me first . . . but then not hide myself away. Am I making sense? Sometimes it requires effort . . . but then, the Virgin makes everything possible.

Now I'm more loving toward my parents, and I'm more charitable toward my brothers and sister . . . There's no other way about it. This is what God wants, and if He wanted me to continue like this forever, without going back to La Trapa . . . what do I care, so long as I have His love? Don't you agree?

If only you could see how much joy that thought gives me. Nothing matters to me . . . Wherever I go, there He is . . .

I'd like to spend every hour talking of Him, or not talking at all. But that's not possible . . . it is His will that it not be . . . I'm satisfied with just talking to Him alone, and treating the world as something secondary—but when done for the sake of His love, all is well, little sister. If only you could see.

Tomorrow, after Holy Mass, I have to go to the mechanic, to get something or other fixed in the car . . . but I'll do it with true joy. I'll see God among the screws and oil . . . I'll think about the mechanics around me, who may not know God, so I'll pray for them . . . I do know Him, and I'll have Him there at my side, talking about everything with everybody with great cheer, because that's what the Lord wants . . . I'll practice patience, charity, love of neighbor . . . But don't you get the idea that all this will be work. As I said, I do everything with joy . . . how could I not? I have God within me, I receive Him in the morning, He accompanies me all day . . . The struggle has disappeared, nothing annoys me anymore . . . Why?

Before, I wanted everybody to observe silence. I wanted everybody to see God. When the Lord's name was mentioned, I wanted even the trams to stop. It was a very special way of loving God, but it was also a very special way of loving myself (I don't know if I'm making sense!), for in my external recollection, I was seeking only myself.

This is no longer the case, thanks be to God and the Virgin. If one of my brothers needs me for something other than God, I do it in God's name . . . and so I do two things at once . . . but one thing above all: fulfill His holy will.

Take heart, little sister. You can fly, I'm sure of it. Pay the world no mind. Make a tabernacle within your own heart, place the Lord there . . . and what more do you want? You are the temple for that tabernacle . . . You are the temple where God is hidden. Open your doors, don't hide Him away . . . I know how sometimes those humble little chapels look like they're going to collapse from all the bad weather . . . so don't worry if from time to time you have to repair the roof or the bell tower . . . Everything made of clay and matter will wear and tear, and sometimes it'll fall, but it doesn't matter. Everything can be fixed.

Your path is that "little footpath," and you don't need to do great things . . . But who's to say that the lay brother wasn't flying high? Who's to say that while he carried his jug in one hand, his other hand wasn't holding God's?<sup>676</sup>

I no longer see your doubt anywhere. Perfect your interior life, and you'll see, your exterior life won't disturb your peace, but quite the contrary . . .

You'll see, then your temper will go away. And you'll see, when you come back from communion all recollected, only to go back to your house chores, after having been in contemplation and having spoken with Our Lady, you'll be filled with joy (and even *joie de vivre*) from every direction . . . You'll see, you'll come to love everyone more and better.

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<sup>676</sup> "It was afternoon already, and the clouds / were illumined with the sun's rays / when the good lay brother, carrying his jug, / went walking along the little footpath, blessing God" (José María Pemán, "Ballad of the Lay Brother's Doubts" ("*Balada de las dudas del lego*"), *Tiempo de Poesía*, verse 1). Translation mine.



The thought that God loves you will give you wings . . . That thought alone must be enough for you . . . You'll move through the world, and the world won't take notice . . . And if *now* you allow creatures to see rudeness in you, rather than patience; impatience, rather than charity; and agitation where there should be serenity and sweetness . . . then go ahead and doubt, little sister, doubt away. (Maybe I'm being too hard on you . . .) But either you lack humility, or the devil is in your way.

Don't worry, it will all pass. You'll see, the evil spirit will shrink away when the Virgin comes to your aid . . . Don't doubt as you give yourself fully to God . . . If only you knew how much He loves you!

What *you'd prefer* is to fly, not to come down to earth . . . but you can do so much good right where you are.

You spoke of your character . . . Well that's easy enough. Ask Mary to reform you, and there you go. If you fall from time to time? . . . Well all right, who doesn't fall? Get up and carry on . . . Anything but getting discouraged . . . God loves you the way you are, despite everything.

It seems impossible that you should think such things. I can almost guess your thoughts. I know what you'll think when you get this letter. But look, Saint Teresa would go into ecstasy in the morning, and then go deal with people in the afternoon, handling all the material things that would come up. Isn't that so?

In short, my dear little sister, there are so many things I'd tell you if only I knew how . . . but I can't. I just want to send you the very great peace that belongs to those who know we are beloved by God, despite knowing just how miserable and ungenerous we are.

I want to send you the sweetness of character and heart that belongs to the one who truly loves God. Follow your path, but with the peace of Christ. That's all I can say for today . . . It's getting very late.

I was so grateful for the gift of the holy card. Tell Dolores it's very well written<sup>677</sup> . . . If only you could see what delight such little things bring to my soul. Sometimes I think this sensitivity of mine doesn't serve me well . . . But anyway, as always . . . God wants it that way. May He repay your kindness.

Well, little sister, I'll leave it there for today. It's already the 16<sup>th</sup> now that it's one in the morning. I've just come back from the doctor's house, and he thought I was doing much better. He reduced my dose of insulin, and he told me he'd get me down to zero very soon . . .

I'm very pleased. But something's missing today . . . I couldn't go to Communion. My father didn't wake me up, and I had a pretty bad night . . . I don't know why . . . but on the days I don't receive the Lord, I'm all disoriented, like I'm missing something, something that's everything to me. Anyway, blessed be the Lord.

I don't know if I've quite gotten it all right in this letter, but listen, I'll say it again: take from it what suits you, and leave the rest. I never want to be the reason that you get all mixed up, despite my best intentions. Do you understand? I'll write you a longer letter another day.

Uncle Polín told me he'd seen you crying over one of my letters . . . *don't be silly.*

With all my great affection, your brother,

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<sup>677</sup> *Dolores*: Dolores Barón Osorio, Rafael's cousin and María's daughter.

*Brother María Rafael, O.C.R.*

Meanwhile, let's get the stable ready for the Child Jesus.

87. to Leopoldo Barón

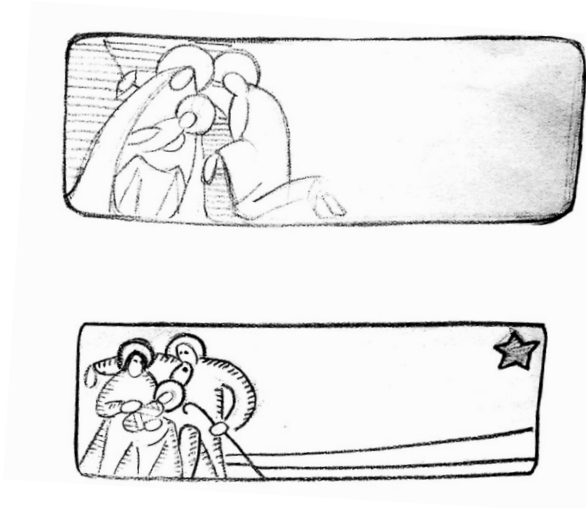


Fig. 4<sup>678</sup>

Oviedo, December 16, 1935

J-H-S

So as not to be outdone by you, I'll say: "Brother Rafael begs Brother Bernardo to have charity, that he might hear him."<sup>679</sup>

My dearest brother in the Lord,

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<sup>678</sup> According to OC 523, Rafael began this letter with a Christmas-themed sketch. These two sketches can be found in Antonio Cobos Soto, *La "pintura mensaje" del hermano Rafael* (Burgos: Monte Carmelo y Monasterio Cisterciense de San Isidro de Dueñas, 1989), 183.

<sup>679</sup> "Brother Bernardo" was one of Rafael's nicknames for his uncle Leopoldo; clearly, it was an inside joke between them.

I received your letter, and now I'm sitting down to write you . . . and I have nothing to say. If I were to talk about myself, what for? . . . And if I were to talk about God and the Virgin, I don't know. It's almost better to remain silent; but since I don't want to do that, I'm sending you this note, though it be poorly written, so that with it you might receive the *Te Deum* (on my holy card).<sup>680</sup> The *Te Deum* of life, as you would say.

You might think it looks sad, but it's not . . . Whenever I paint, what happens is that after adding and adding to it, the paintings always turn out like that . . . a bit gray.

But look . . . for a Trappist, *joie de vivre* consists of the sure hope of death . . . and when we contemplate the crosses in the cemetery that mark the places where our brothers are at rest . . . it brings us great joy . . . An intense joy at knowing they are in heaven already and thinking about how we will be with them one day . . . Our entire wisdom consists of knowing how to wait.

Then, my dear brother, then indeed is there *joie de vivre* . . . There is happiness in the waiting, and in suffering as one waits . . .

Don't think of my poor drawing as something sad, then . . . It's not at all. It might strike you as paradoxical, but it's the happiest thing I've been able to do . . . It is a joy to think that everything comes to an end, a holy joy to think that we are foreigners on this

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<sup>680</sup> *Te Deum*: a hymn of thanksgiving, then prayed at the conclusion of Matins (the earliest Hour of the day) on Sundays and feast days. Today, it is prayed at the conclusion of the Office of Readings. For the holy card Rafael painted for his uncle, see Fig. 5 at the end of this letter.

earth . . . To think that we are to die very soon, so that we can see God and Our Lady, brings true delight to the monk's heart . . .

You know the whole Rule, or nearly all of it. You've visited the monastery. You're very close to the Cistercian spirit . . . But what you haven't seen is how, in La Trapa, the Trappist's most sublime moment, his *Te Deum* moment . . . is the moment of his death . . . Am I making sense? . . . Meanwhile, waiting is his life . . . Waiting with faith, with love, with holy peace . . . That is the only *joie de vivre* . . . to burn with love for God, and to know that our God is waiting for us.

What does it matter if you're suffering or rejoicing? You have God, don't you? . . . Who are you, meanwhile? Don't worry about yourself, poor thing. You don't even *know* how to suffer, you aren't *capable* of rejoicing . . . Let God take you over, and then, you will have neither suffering nor joy . . . you will have peace . . . Your heart will be still and rooted in God, and waiting will be your life . . . and waiting serenely, without being impatient or afraid . . . That is life, that is the only *joie de vivre* . . .

Anyway, dear brother, don't pay me any mind. I'm just a poor Trappist who's a bit mad.

You say that sometimes you regret speaking . . . Maybe, but listen . . . that's because you don't know how to speak about God. If you did know how, you'd shout, and you'd speak of nothing else . . .

God, the only reason for our lives. How could we not speak about Him? . . . But we don't know how. When we realize how little we are, and how big He is, we fall silent, and it seems that we speak more by our silence . . . Anyway, I don't know what I'm

talking about. You already understand. I want to talk to you about God and I fall silent too. You don't need me to say a thing.

I would like to write you a long letter, but I'm going to leave it there . . . I wish I could pour my whole soul into it, but since I can't, I'll be satisfied with just sending you my holy card. When you look at it, remember your nephew, your brother, who made it for you with all his love. And if you don't like it, send it back with your comments, and I'll make you another one.

Everything in your letter gave me great consolation . . . I'd never want to take your cross away from you, and believe me, I don't pity you . . . quite the opposite . . . You'll see, we're going to have such a *Te Deum* to sing together, you amidst all your Toro business, me at La Trapa . . . What does it all matter? Don't you think? . . . If only you knew how happy I am. The Virgin loves me so much.

Tomorrow I'm going to write to my grandmother . . . Please tell her not to worry, she'll never go without.

As for my mother and Merceditas's journey, I have nothing to tell you . . . My mother suspects, but she doesn't yet know.<sup>681</sup> The coming days will be a bit . . . Anyway, when Merceditas's return to Castile comes up<sup>682</sup> . . . we fall silent. My mother is

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<sup>681</sup> *My mother suspects*: that is, Rafael's plan to re-enter La Trapa after Christmas.

<sup>682</sup> Both Rafael and his mother had accompanied Merceditas on her previous long-term stay in Madrid (Castile) for medical treatment (see Letter 62). However, this time, Rafael had opted not to join them without explicitly stating that it was because he was returning to La Trapa.

saddened by the thought of just the two of them going now . . . I understand that, and I assure you, it breaks my heart.

Lord . . . Lord, make me generous and give me strength . . . You ask so much of me, and I want to give You so much . . . It's everything, and even that everything is so little and so full of imperfection . . . He will know how to put it right . . . Let us place ourselves in His hands, and in those of the Virgin.

I have nothing more to tell you . . . I'm truly sorry that the orphanage is closing.<sup>683</sup> There is no faith anymore . . . People look to human beings for everything. It's sad that Nazareth House is closing precisely when it ought to be even more of a Nazareth House . . . now, in this season when we commemorate the home, which these children lack. With just a little effort from everyone, maybe we could give those little angels the joy of finding themselves absolutely coddled by Christ's love . . . for the love of the Christ Child . . . What a shame . . . I'd been thinking of them during this season . . . I'd grown rather fond of them . . . I promise you, when Aunt María told me in her last letter, it caused me great sorrow . . . But there's no faith anymore, brother . . . Besides, the way I see it, if those children come and go like that, as if they were at school, they could get lost. Don't you think?

I think the people from the government didn't understand the spirit of the enterprise . . . Anyway, who am I to have an opinion . . . but don't be discouraged . . . Well, I already know.

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<sup>683</sup> Nazareth House, an orphanage of which María Osorio was a prominent sponsor (see Letter 75).



Tell Aunt María to be good, and I'll write her back one of these days . . . I'm telling you, I don't even recognize myself these days, I'm using up so much ink and paper.

I know you don't need me to write, but I'll write you again before I leave . . . even if you think it's a bad idea.<sup>684</sup> It can't be helped, we'll always be what we are to each other. My desire is *God alone* . . . but what am I going to do, brother? . . . I don't need you to write me either . . . Do what you want, but I don't want to say one way or the other, just in case, because if we decide one way . . . the Lord might go the other way. Am I making sense?

Well, that's all. I know I needn't ask, but please do remember to pray to the Virgin sometime, not to ask Her to take anything away from us here at home, but rather to help us all.

With all my great affection, your brother, the future Cistercian oblate,

*Brother María Rafael, O.C.R.*<sup>685</sup>

In a few days, I'll send you something you'll like . . . And no, it's not turrón.<sup>686</sup>

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<sup>684</sup> No further letters from Rafael to his uncle before his return to La Trapa have been preserved.

<sup>685</sup> Underneath his signature, Rafael included a drawing with the phrase "*Gloria in excelsis Deo*" (Luke 2:14). See OC 527.

<sup>686</sup> *Turrón*: a type of nougat, traditionally eaten in Spain at Christmastime.



Fig. 5<sup>687</sup>

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<sup>687</sup> The holy card Rafael painted for his uncle, mentioned earlier in the letter. The inscription reads “knowing how to wait” (“*saber esperar*”). Image source: Antonio Cobos Soto, *La “pintura mensaje” del Hermano Rafael* (Burgos: Monte Carmelo y Monasterio Cisterciense de San Isidro de Dueñas, 1989), 215.

**88. to Fernanda Torres**

Oviedo, December 17, 1935

J-H-S

My dearest grandmother,

It's past time I answer your letter. First of all, I should say that you don't need to ask me for what you asked . . . Rest assured that my poor prayers are headed your way, and that you have a grandson who has offered himself to the Lord for the sake of all in the silence of my Trapa. Believe me, if by my sacrifices I could alleviate some of the difficulties of your final years, I would do so gladly . . . I offer them all to Our Lady, so that She might do what She wills . . . I can do nothing more.

I'm so grateful that you've been thinking of your grandson during this time, which is going to be somewhat sorrowful, and that you're praying, not for me . . . but rather for my parents . . . Ultimately, I suffer gladly for God's sake; for Him, I'd do what I'm doing now a million times over . . . and I assure you, that when you do everything for Him . . . there is no difficulty or sorrow that you cannot endure, and even the tears shed along the way become the treasure with which we shall someday present ourselves before Him . . . Don't you go longing to wipe my tears away, because I'm telling you . . . I am completely happy.

In your letter, you asked me to pour out my soul to you . . . How difficult it is, *abuelita* . . . I wouldn't know how, in such a short space, being as incoherent as I am . . . But I'll just say that my life is my vocation, and my vocation comes down to this alone: love for God. With that, I've said it all . . .

I assure you, my return to La Trapa is nothing but that: love for God.

Over these past two years, the Lord has been perfecting my vocation, without me even realizing it until now . . . and all I can do is thank Him from the depths of my soul for the gentleness with which He has treated me. It was my very great fortune to have had to leave my monastery . . . Now I know much more deeply what a Cistercian vocation is worth . . . Blessed be the Lord for everything!

Don't you worry, *abuela*, because your days are coming to an end. Have confidence in the absolute certainty that they will come to a good one. You, poor creature, can do nothing; all you can do is wait . . . And the thought that you are getting close now must be a deep consolation to you . . . You should think of nothing but that, but not on account of your age. What does age matter?! I am 24 years old, and seen rightly, we have the same amount of time left, considering that eternity comes afterward . . . Your days are a mere speck of dust that will dissolve into infinity; don't focus on that speck, but rather immerse yourself in that infinity, which is God.

Why should you be afraid? . . . Have confidence that the Lord loves you, and if you have lived your life according to God's law, that is the law by which you must be judged, and that law is not severe. It doesn't demand great things. It comes down to just a little bit of love . . .

It doesn't consist of austerity or fasting or disciplines or suffering or sorrow . . . None of that is of any use if you don't have love for God . . . Practice that during these final years, and you'll see how holy you become . . . You don't need a whole lifetime for that, a mere minute is enough, and you still have time . . . Don't you worry, *abuelita*, I'll be helping you from La Trapa. You'll see.

I wholeheartedly accept the gift you sent me, which is your love . . . I don't deserve it, I know, but I'll take it with me to La Trapa. There, I'll place it at the feet of the Virgin, alongside that of my parents.

I almost have nothing left to say. Don't measure my love by this letter's length . . . Look my intentions instead, and be charitable and understanding. I would like to tell you so many things, but what for? I don't know if we'll see each other again. I think we will . . . but whatever the Lord wants. We are in His hands.

Don't worry about material things . . . You will want for nothing, you can be assured of that.

Give Aunt María a very big hug for me.<sup>688</sup> With all my great affection, your grandson, who is always thinking of you,

*Brother María Rafael, O.C.S.O.*

From the bottom of my heart, I wish you a Christmas very close to God.

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<sup>688</sup> *Aunt María*: María Josefa Barón Torres, Fernanda's daughter, who lived with her in Toro.

## 89. to María Osorio

Oviedo, December 20, 1935

J-H-S

My dearest sister,

Did you get my letter? I expect yours tomorrow. I thought it would get here today, but it didn't.

I don't have anything to tell you right now, I can't think of anything . . . These past few days have been somewhat rough . . . Well, very rough. I'm not complaining, because it's my own fault, but sometimes it makes me sad that I am the way I am . . . If only you knew, little sister. What the Lord gives me, I don't reciprocate. He has legitimate grievances against me, I know . . . And nevertheless I do nothing to fix it . . .

For a few days now, I don't know what has been going on with me . . . Every morning, I go to receive the Lord with most ardent desire. I go in order to ask His forgiveness and to tell Him that I love Him and that I'll never separate myself from Him . . . Well, believe me, the minute I leave church, I forget about all that *entirely*. I'm a fool for the rest of the day, I pray badly, I get tired, and then when this time of night comes (it's half past midnight), I go to my room and do my examen . . . and it greatly saddens me to realize that I *don't reciprocate*. I promise to love Him more tomorrow . . . I go to sleep with the consolation of knowing that I'll have Him close to me again the next morning, in just a few hours . . . He'll be with me, and I'll tell Him about my infidelity and sorrows and weakness . . . and every day I fall asleep in that peace . . .

But look, I know that if I reciprocated all God's gifts and little hints, I'd be a saint already . . . I see a very long road ahead . . . I'm at the beginning, and I contribute nothing for my part . . . It's sad, but true. Any obstacle appears . . . and I stumble . . .

Anyway, I've often heard Uncle Polín say that "we must love our own weaknesses," and it's not that I love mine, exactly . . . but I recognize them, and they make me practice humility before God . . . We are nothing, sister . . . such children we are. What would we do without Jesus? . . . I tell Him that every morning . . . and it's not that I get upset, but He knows that if He leaves me on my own . . . where would I go?

Lord, Lord, look what You are doing to Your servant. But if only you knew, I'm so *distracted*, it pains me so. I have such a strong desire to be back at La Trapa already.

No one and nothing is coming to my aid, and these are truly days of trial. I can only rely on the Virgin Mary. I think of Her always, but sometimes I fall into *human* concerns, and I find myself alone. As I said, I'm not complaining, God and Mary forbid . . . I'm just telling you about it, and that brings me consolation . . . But I am truly a wretch . . . I should so like to love God . . . Lord, I don't know. Either I don't want to, or . . . Oh, if only I reciprocated what You give me.

Anyway, I don't want to fill this letter up with lamentations. It shouldn't be like that. But of course, you think I'm a different kind of person than I am. You have to remember, dear little sister, who you're dealing with . . . Well, I won't say any more because you wouldn't believe me, and you'd think maybe it's false humility . . . But the Lord knows it all, and that's enough for me.

Did Uncle Polín like the holy card I sent him?

I wrote to my grandmother the day before yesterday. What is she going to do? Will she finally go to Ávila? . . . How is your business? And what about you? Has your grumpiness gone away? So many things, sister . . . there are so many things I'd ask you and tell you.

I only have a very few days left now at home, very few days left dealing with the world . . . And if only you could see this, God is permitting it, but now I'm suddenly interested in all of it twice as much. I don't know what's happening to me . . . I'm acting as if I were never actually going to leave . . . On the other hand, I don't care about any of this, I'm eager to have silence again and leave it all behind. I want to fly, and everything is holding me down . . .

Oh, sister, if only you knew what a difficult struggle this is . . . How long it's taking for these days to pass . . . but they're getting shorter and shorter . . .

My mother and sister think (they aren't sure yet) that they'll go to Portugal on the 8<sup>th</sup>, apparently that's the cheap option, and then they'll go to Madrid. They also want to go to Zaragoza to visit the Virgin . . . They don't have a set plan yet, but I don't know if I should leave before or after. What's best? I ask not for my own sake, but for my mother's . . . She still doesn't know anything, but since she's very worried about me, I'm going to tell her . . . Maybe tomorrow.



My father and Leopoldo want to come to Venta de Baños<sup>689</sup> . . . Fernando arrives on Saturday.<sup>690</sup>

I'm in a daze . . . I didn't think it was all going to be this hard. But I'm not complaining . . . if the Lord wants to prolong this struggle, even if it means I'll be in constant agony . . . may God be blessed.

Listen, I didn't want to make you sad . . . I shouldn't tell you about any of these troubles of mine . . . But have pity, sister . . . If only I were a saint! . . . All this is an escape, a chance to unburden myself . . . I'm very low to the ground today . . . I'm a man just like any other . . . and when I see myself like this, it pains me to think about the trust you've placed in this creature . . . I don't deserve it, and it puts me to shame.

For the world, what I am going to do is such a lovely gesture . . . Heroics are just delightful when performed with a smile . . . But look, I'm telling you all this so that you can see me for what I really am, and despise me . . . Behind that façade, sometimes there are very bitter tears . . . crosses that the world doesn't know about, and doesn't carry well, dragging them around . . . Underneath the surface there's nothing but misery, foul misery . . . What a shame! I don't know how I could be like this . . .

There are so many things I would say, but I'm afraid of scandalizing you. But underneath that gesture of going to La Trapa, which the world thinks I'm doing with

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<sup>689</sup> *Venta de Baños*: the town where the Monastery of San Isidro de Dueñas was located.

<sup>690</sup> *Saturday*: that is, December 21, 1935. As Rafael implies here, his father and his brother Leopoldo both accompanied him when he made his second entrance into La Trapa on January 11, 1936.

extraordinary pleasure and purely for love of God, there's a man—me, all too refined, averse to the cilice and horribly repulsed by the discipline<sup>691</sup> . . . I carry around this material being, which is in rebellion . . .

Oh, little sister, sometimes it puts me to shame to call you that . . . You don't know what I am, you don't know me . . . Suffering terrifies me, when it should be quite the opposite. I should love the cross, I should rejoice in it . . . but as I stumble over these thorns . . . Lord, Lord, I don't know what I am saying . . .

You told me not to ask your forgiveness ever again, but look, I can't help it. You love me, and I don't deserve that. You don't know what I'm really like . . . I don't deserve the good opinion of any creature, I'm telling you that right now, hand on heart . . . God knows it, and so do I. I'm going to La Trapa to be holy, but I'm not holy yet. I don't want to deceive the world, I don't want to deceive you . . . I can't convince the world, but you understand me, although maybe you don't understand me right now, and you think I'm exaggerating . . . but I'm not.

If only you knew, if I were as I ought to be, and I loved the Lord as He deserves . . . I wouldn't think about myself at all, I wouldn't struggle at all. But my love for God, which is great, has to struggle against my self . . . am I making sense? I'm a wretch and I don't know how I even dare to talk about God . . . but the Lord is so good! Isn't He? That is the only consolation I have . . . that and Mary.

Today I'm looking at myself too much. I'm always telling you to do the opposite, and instead of preaching by example . . . look at how I'm acting . . . But have pity on me .

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<sup>691</sup> *Cilice* and *discipline*: Instruments of physical penance (see Letter 40).

. . . When you've been struggling for many days . . . I won't say any more, just that your last letter inspired me to tell you everything. I fear only one thing, which I'll tell you honestly, and that is the possibility of scandalizing you . . . But I'll consider this all quite proper if it has made it possible for you to know me more deeply. If sinking to the bottom of my soul helps you see what's really there . . . misery and cowardice . . . Don't look for anything else.

Right now it's eight o'clock at night. I've just finished reading your letter. All day I was in *Infiesto*<sup>692</sup> and I wasn't able to finish . . . I was about to tear up everything I'd already written, I'm telling you . . . but I thought better of it, and you can be the one to rip it up . . . Listen, that's just what came out yesterday . . . You have to understand, and when I start to look inward . . . I don't know what to do with myself . . . and everything causes me shame. Today I'm doing well . . . very well. Your letter gave me deep consolation. You're the only one who talks to me about God . . . You think you aren't doing anything, but you're wrong. You're a very good example to me, *despite your wretchedness*, and you're teaching me how to suffer. Blessed be the Virgin Mary.

You said that we'll spend Christmas rejoicing and suffering . . . I don't know. I'm a bit out of it. Believe me, I don't know how to carry on a conversation, I don't know what I'm saying or doing, or what's happening to me. Sometimes everything just gets so overwhelming . . .

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<sup>692</sup> *Infiesto*: a town east of Oviedo.

But look, despite everything I said to you before, I have peace . . . I don't understand it . . . But I am content, and this "understanding while not understanding" fills me with joy.<sup>693</sup>

See? We all have our ups and downs . . . and we must thank the Lord that we do not lack for suffering.

How great the Lord is, little sister. He loves us so much, how happy I am . . . I'm more cheerful today, if only you could see. Nevertheless, I have one affliction . . . I saw my mother crying . . . I don't know if I'm making sense, I'm just writing non sequiturs.

Well, I'm going to stop thinking about what's going on with me . . . and . . . let us love the Lord, let us look to Mary. Let us unite ourselves to the angels in heaven who are singing of His imminent arrival on earth . . . Everything passes . . . let us wait, are you agreed? And let us wait with joy . . . What a great consolation it is to have God . . . How selfish of us to fail to appreciate that . . . I have such a desire to be in La Trapa again . . . to throw myself entirely into the arms of the Virgin, and there, without anyone taking notice . . .

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<sup>693</sup> "I entered into unknowing / and there I remained unknowing / transcending all knowledge. [...] I was so [over]whelmed, / so absorbed and withdrawn / that my senses were left / deprived of all their sensing, / and my spirit was given / *an understanding while not understanding* / transcending all knowledge" (Saint John of the Cross, "Stanzas concerning an ecstasy experienced in high contemplation," in *Collected Works* trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez [Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1989], 53; emphasis added).

Don't you go thinking that you're a "nuisance" I need to be patient with. Bless the Lord, such things you say. You don't know how much encouragement I get from writing you . . . Truly, it is a gift from the Lord, that right now, when He *knew* that I was going to need it, He gave me a reason . . . an occasion to express the movements of my soul. Whether they are movements of intense love, or sometimes desolation . . . expressing them to another soul who understands me gives me so much peace . . . The day is coming, and it is coming soon, when the silence will be absolute, and then, perhaps, the love of God will enter into me more fully.

So, then, you don't need to worry about me. I've done what I could, I've shared with you what I could . . . my love for God, my joy when I have it, my affection for the Virgin, my great tenderness toward Our Lady, who consoles and guides me . . .

The only thing I don't want to share with you is my cross . . . leave my sorrows to me. Even if I gave you a bad impression at the beginning of this letter, please forgive me. Who doesn't have moments of discouragement? . . . So you know me better now, and more deeply, but those moments pass quickly. The Lord *doesn't let me* stop and stare at myself for too long . . . He *knows* that it just makes me feel bad, even though it's necessary sometimes . . . He wants us to be humble, and this is one of the ways He does that . . .

Don't you see, little sister, how great the Lord is? . . . At the same time that He shows us our misery and weakness, He also gives us . . . such a great love! . . . What a great consolation this is . . .

When we reach eternal glory, we will love the Lord, from Mary's arms . . . But until then? . . . Well, nothing, it's very easy. We'll just love Him from our littleness, from

this “one night in a bad inn,” as the Saint said,<sup>694</sup> referring to this life in which everything is an obstacle to our delight in God . . . our own selves being the primary obstacle . . .

Take heart, little sister, and pay me no mind. Go beyond the created being, go beyond yourself, and love God . . . Believe me, the mere thought of that gives me wings . . .

God! . . . God! . . . There is nothing but that . . . there’s no cross, no delight, no creature . . . The creature cannot endure, but God alone can . . .

Pay me no mind, please forgive me . . . just hear these cries of a soul who is surrounded by sins and obstacles, as many joyful ones as sad . . . It’s as if I were deep in a well, with the water up to my neck, cold and half dead. What does it matter? But from those depths, I cry out with all my soul . . . “God, God, Mary . . .” And then, believe me, what’s the difference if you find yourself in the murky blackness of the darkness of that well or on the sunny plain? . . . In either place, the soul knows only one thing, and that is to cry out . . . “God, God, Christ . . . how long You delay!”

Suffering and rejoicing are the least of our concerns. Whether we are suffering or rejoicing doesn’t matter at all. Ultimately, that’s about us. No . . . Lord, You alone are our life. You alone should be our only reason for living . . . You alone . . . not us, not at all.

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<sup>694</sup> “If it is hard for a self-indulgent person [. . .] to spend one night in a bad inn, what do you think that sad soul will feel at being in this kind of inn forever, without end? Let us not desire delights, daughters; we are well-off here; the bad inn lasts for only a night” (Saint Teresa of Ávila, *The Way of Perfection*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh [Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 2013], 442).

Little sister . . . what depths, what a flood! . . . To love God . . . Do you know what that is? . . . No, you don't. It makes one go mad, you don't know what to say . . .

To love God . . . what a disgrace, Lord, I should be silent . . . I don't know, I'm a fool . . . But even so, Lord, I love You madly and utterly foolishly, perhaps even without realizing it . . . I don't want to realize it. What would be the point? . . . I want to love You just because. Why are You doing this to me, Lord? . . . Why do You treat me like this? . . . I don't know, I've gone mad.

Forgive me, little sister. The Lord is great, He is greater than all other gods, and He treats this brother of yours with such . . . If only you knew, I have such an urge to go hide.

Well, it's passed now. This letter will be full of nonsense when it reaches you . . . I don't mind.

I'm so happy that Uncle Polin was pleased with my holy card . . . If only you knew, I painted it with so much affection.

I'm going to do a drawing of Saint Francis of Assisi for my father next, he's the patron saint of the Forest Engineers . . . He's very excited about it. He is so good.

What you said about leaving on the 15<sup>th</sup>, well, I don't know. I think I'll leave sooner than that, but once my mother and sister have left, it's going to be very difficult for me to stay home . . . I shouldn't keep pushing it . . . that would be tempting God, and I don't know my own strength. Please understand me. But look, since I'll be going by car . . . who knows. Anyway, I won't promise anything. The Lord will tell me what to do. But

maybe on the way I'll decide to come by and give you and Uncle Polín a hug<sup>695</sup> . . . Do you think that would be a bad idea? It's of no importance, but I'll do whatever you tell me to do. But don't you go thinking that would be goodbye . . . Anyway, I'll leave it there. We're off to dinner . . . I'll continue later.

My dearest sister, now I have peace and quiet, so I'm going to continue answering your letter.

I'm glad my letters don't get you all mixed up . . . you don't know how glad. They're so messy . . . but it's true, where clarity is lacking, your good will makes up for it. Indeed, you don't need to contribute anything on your part, just your good will and intention, as you said, right? . . . Because that alone is *enough* . . .

Besides, everything is so simple, so clear, so easy . . . What's bad is when we not only fail to contribute our good intentions, but we in fact contribute obstacles . . . That's the worst. But letting you be . . . you don't need to do anything, and nobody needs to point you down any particular path, or tell you how to act . . . The way I see it, love is the only wisdom you need, and nothing else . . . *Love on the inside and humility on the outside*, and nothing else. And that's plenty. We think that we need to do great things in order to be holy . . . and no. We don't even need to draw any attention to ourselves.

You shouldn't care that *right now* you don't know or see what you're meant to do . . . You'll see, Our Lady will enlighten you, and in addition to Her help, *your own failings* will instruct you . . . They are the only teachers I've ever had . . . If only you

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<sup>695</sup> As Rafael implies here, he did end up passing through Ávila to see his aunt and uncle before his re-entrance into La Trapa.



knew how well you learn while weeping . . . and we'll never stop failing, nor will we ever stop learning. So don't you worry . . . Right now you have only one task, one occupation: loving God . . . the best you can, the best you know how, but always loving Him. Let's see if that heart of yours is finally set alight . . . Then you won't have any questions left to ask . . . and you'll *know* what you're meant to do . . . Then *you'll see* that there is only one path, a great broad path, a path that never narrows or curves . . . A path that leads to the widest of horizons . . . God . . . See how easy that is?

How innocent you are, I was going to say simple . . . it's as if I were to say to you, "Little sister, I love God so much! He is my only life and my only treasure . . . I love Him so much, so much that I don't know what to do. What should I do?" . . . And you'd reply laughing . . . "Well don't do *anything* at all. What more could you do?" . . . "But if I am meant to do something, I don't see it. I don't see any path, all I see is how much I want to love Him . . . and love Him truly . . ." And then you'll say, "And?! What else is it that you want to see? . . . Do you want to look for complications? Your whole interior life comes down to this: loving God, and loving Him more and more . . . Why are you looking for a path where there isn't one? . . . Are there paths in the sea?"

How innocent you are, little sister. I envy you . . . What more help could you want other than God and Mary? . . . Maybe you haven't realized.

See how easy it is? . . . Your interior life: loving God . . . and as for your life in the world? . . . If I were a terrible preacher, I'd scowl and tell you . . . penance, prayer, mortification of the senses, etc . . . And sure, that's all well and good . . . but I think it's easier than all that: *All you have to do is humbly obey the dictates of the love for God that you carry within you* . . . I don't know if I'm explaining myself well, but you'll see.

If you love God, you must love creatures; they are His work, His image . . . And so, you have charity.

If you love God, and you love Him *completely*, you won't love yourself; you'll consider yourself so despicable that you won't think about yourself at all; while loving God, you cannot care about anything that concerns yourself . . . so, you have humility. If you love God, how could you not be humble? I can't see any other way.

If you love God . . . then you have prayer, even if you don't think you do . . . You don't need to rack your brain to pray, right? . . . What does your prayer consist of? Well, one act of love for God after another . . . until one day, all those separate acts of love are transformed into one, and then you truly will be set alight. Then, as I said, you'll have no questions left to ask.

I won't go on, but you understand what I'm saying, don't you? *Everything* comes from love for God . . . You'll see, if you perfect that love which is your only interior life . . . nothing else is of any importance. That same love will make you humble, penitential, charitable . . . It'll make you holy . . . holy for love's sake . . . Holy entirely and exclusively for love's sake. . .

See, little sister, how easy that is? . . . You don't have to do anything but obey the dictates of your own poor heart, which is more or less alight. It doesn't matter if you fall . . . It doesn't matter if you're discouraged . . . The miracle of love can do all things . . . Everything will become easy for you . . . delight, suffering, and even *waiting*.

Look, everything I'm saying here, I don't know if it's what's best for you, but it's what's easiest. It's not complicated, and you'll see, it produces results . . . Ask Our Lady for the love She has for Her Son . . . That's how the Virgin was able to endure

everything, that's how She was able to witness Her Son's death: for love's sake, and that alone . . . That's how our Mother was able to suffer what she suffered. That's how She was able to be separated from Him . . . For love's sake, She was humble; for love's sake, She was the holiest of women . . . Ask Our Lady for some of that love . . . and you'll see.

Yes, little sister, give yourself over completely, and don't you go thinking that your exterior life will suffer as a result, no . . . quite the contrary . . . How beautiful it will be for you to do your tasks around the house for God's sake. To speak and laugh for God's sake, to love your children for God's sake . . . And if God *floods* you, some of that flood will reach those around you . . . Be generous, and don't put any obstacles in their way . . . May your life be a continuous act of love for Jesus . . . I'll pray to the Virgin for this intention. She will hear me, I'm certain. Isn't it true that there's no possible complication this way? Answer me honestly.

I wanted this letter to go out today, but it wasn't possible. I'll leave it there for now, it's getting late. I'll finish it tomorrow, although I won't have any time to write at all.

For tonight, then, receive all your little brother's affection.

Today, Saturday the 21st, I continue, even though I don't have anything to say . . .

We're all eager for Fernando to arrive today from Belgium . . . I don't know how long he'll be here, but around fifteen days or so.

You didn't say anything in your letter about how you're getting along . . . Are you afraid to worry me? . . . I'm so stupid, every day I wait for the mailman . . .

Now I'm going to eat and then pray, because this morning I didn't get to pray, I just received the Lord and heard holy Mass . . .

By God, little sister, don't forget to pray for me in the coming days, just look at how I'm doing. If you go and see Sor Pilar,<sup>696</sup> tell her that I'm very much thinking of their community this Christmas, won't you?

Well, that's all for now. I no longer have the peace and quiet I need in this house to write you. I want this letter to reach you tomorrow (Sunday),<sup>697</sup> so I'll end it here.

How is Pilar doing?<sup>698</sup> I remember everything about that house . . . I can't help it. Blessed be the Most Holy Virgin. I ask Her to guide my letter, and by means of Her, may you receive all that I wish to send you through it. It's so much, dear little sister! . . . I don't know, I can't say anything more.

*Brother María Rafael, O.C.S.O.*

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<sup>696</sup> *Sor Pilar*: Sor Pilar García, the abbess of the Poor Clare monastery in Ávila and a friend and spiritual mentor of Rafael's (see Letter 43).

<sup>697</sup> *Sunday*: That is, December 22, 1935.

<sup>698</sup> *Pilar*: Pilar Barón Osorio, María's daughter and Rafael's cousin, who was sick at the time.

## 90. to María Osorio

Oviedo, December 24, 1935

J-H-S

My dearest sister,

I don't know what to say about your last two letters . . . There's so much to say, but I don't have time (*materially* speaking). Right now it's one-thirty, and we're about to eat. Later, at three o'clock, we're going to go to Avilés,<sup>699</sup> and we'll get back at six, and then the mail goes out at eight. Despite all that, I don't want you to spend tomorrow, Christmas Day, without a note from me, even if it doesn't say anything.

I'll take my time answering both your letters later. For now, let's not think about *our concerns* . . . Let us look at God in the stable.

If only you knew how impatient I am for tonight to arrive . . . I haven't thought of anything else all day . . . I don't know if it's because of your prayers, but the Most Blessed Virgin is helping me in a very *special* way . . . What a joy, little sister, to have a God like ours. Isn't it? . . .

I can't say anything today . . . All I know how to do is wait . . . How great is the Lord, little sister!!!! In just a few hours, we will have that God, become a Child . . . and we will have Him with us . . . I am so happy! . . .

When you receive this letter, the Lord will already be in the world. What will we do? Adore Him, and weep for joy. He is coming for you and me, He is searching for us,

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<sup>699</sup> *Avilés*: A prominent town in Asturias, north of Oviedo.

He is looking at us. The Virgin Mary is offering Him to us . . . How tender the divine Mother is . . .

I don't know what to tell you, I can't think of anything . . . I want to be in heaven, intoning the *Gloria* with the angels and saints. My body is here . . . my soul is very far away . . . Oh, little sister! There are so many things we are going to say to the Child tonight . . . Rather than frankincense and myrrh, we will offer Him our whole heart, without reservation . . . That's what you have done, right? I'll unite myself to your intentions . . . How happy, how joyful we will be! The Lord loves us and accepts us . . .

Anyway, there's nothing I can tell you, I don't know . . . We'll know neither how to rejoice nor how to suffer, we'll come to nothing . . . The mystery of the Nativity fills everything.

Here we are all very worried about Pilarcita<sup>700</sup> . . . Blessed be the Lord! Such things He does. We don't know it, but despite the fact that He has seemingly unleashed pain and the cross upon humanity . . . How gentle these become when we *see* that the Lord is the one who is doing it! . . . I don't know what to say to you . . . everything else disappears when we look at Him . . . isn't that so?

Listen, in La Trapa there was a novice who had just three words written down. He kept them above his desk, so that he could see them and read them constantly . . . That gave him great consolation. The words that surely made my brother *fly* were these: "What about Him?" Enough said, right?

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<sup>700</sup> *Pilarcita*: María's daughter and Rafael's cousin, Pilar Barón Osorio, who was sick at the time.

In conclusion, I'll just say that I've seen so much charity and tenderness in your letters, that all I can do is thank the Most Blessed Virgin for that . . . and you too, my poor sister. I am so sorry involving you in my suffering at times . . . since I have so little of it, while the consolation the Lord sends me is so great . . . that really I am very selfish. Pay me no mind. Everything will pass . . . and if it doesn't, that's all the same to me . . . I want neither to suffer nor to stop suffering. I don't want anything . . . I want to love that Jesus who is coming soon . . . to love God, to love the Virgin . . . I don't know, I don't want anything.

They're calling me to come eat. At six o'clock, I'll keep going for a few more minutes.

It's now seven o'clock and we just got back from Avilés. I don't have time to say anything more except that I'm sending you all the love you could ask for, and as much as I could hope to send.

May you have a very holy Christmas with Uncle Polín and my cousins. Sending my great love to all of you, and as for you . . .

*Brother María Rafael, O.C.S.O.*

**91. Dedication of a holy card to Br. Jesús Sandoval<sup>701</sup>**

Christmas 1935

May this little memento help you to remember your dear brother before the Virgin . . . I'll do the same. Our prayers thus united will ensure that our good Mother helps us to achieve our desire, which is to be able to live and die as Trappists.

When you are discouraged, look to Mary, and you'll see, She will ensure that your tears blossom into flowers that can be offered to Jesus.

In this holy card, I send all my love as your brother,

*Brother María Rafael, O.C.S.O.*

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<sup>701</sup> Br. Jesús Sandoval was an oblate at San Isidro de Dueñas.



92. to María Osorio

Oviedo, December 26, 1935

J-H-S

My dearest little sister,

I'm beginning this letter in the waiting room at the dentist's office . . . I came to make sure my teeth are clean when I bring them to La Trapa.

I'll remember yesterday, Christmas Day, all my life. On the one hand, it was very hard to leave the Christ Child after Communion. I told my mother that I was finally leaving, and under what circumstances . . . You can imagine, I don't need to tell you . . . The Most Blessed Virgin helped me. Everything will be as the Lord commands.

Of course, I'll pass through Ávila . . . I'm not relying on my own strength for anything. I have God, and if He had abandoned me, I don't know what would have become of me, quite some time ago . . . I am very pleased because *I* am not doing anything.

I wanted to write you yesterday, Christmas Day, but we stayed up until two in the morning talking about La Trapa . . . My mother is calm; she has a generosity that elevates her in the eyes of God . . . but she is a mother, and even though she sees that I am happy, I know that she cries when I'm not looking.

We still haven't set a date, but I'll leave before my mother and Mercedes do. Fernando is leaving for Leuven again on January 7.<sup>702</sup> My mother and sister still don't know where they are going, and my father and Leopoldo will stay here. On a human level, it is sad that a family that loves each other so much should be separated in four different places . . . My parents have so much to offer God . . . It is all for God.

I've just come back to the house. It's eight-thirty, and I just spent a moment with the Christ Child at the Carmelite chapel.

All I can do is think about that house in Ávila . . . I consider it my own home!! . . . If only you could see, I've prayed for all of you so much before Jesus . . . He must hear me.

Today we went to Salinas to look at the sea<sup>703</sup> . . . How great is God, little sister! How beautiful His works! I see Him everywhere I look. I'm so happy. I love Him so much . . . Jesus loves me so much. When will I become convinced of it? . . . We creatures are so forgetful . . . What a pity! . . . Anyway, Mary will make it happen.

I don't know what to say . . . I don't know what to tell you. I seem to be empty, and nevertheless, if I were with you, I'd say so many things . . . or maybe nothing at all . . . I know that you are suffering, and that makes me fall silent . . . What else can I do? The Lord is so great . . . He'll do what I don't know how to do, what I can't do . . .

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<sup>702</sup> Rafael's mother and sister were heading to Castile for the latter's medical treatment. His brother Fernando was returning to Leuven, Belgium, where he attended university.

<sup>703</sup> *Salinas*: A beach town north of Oviedo.

I want to send you little rays of light and love for Jesus. I don't know if they are reaching you. I think they are . . . I'm sending them by way of Our Lady . . . Maybe they're very weak, but I put all I can into them.

I love you because you are suffering, and you are suffering for God, that God who is mine . . .

How often I have offered myself to the Lord for the sake of all the souls who are suffering for Him . . . I find myself so united to all the pain in this world . . . If only I could relieve any of it . . . But I don't need to relieve you of anything . . . you are going in the right direction. Even though I am suffering with you . . . I don't mind. That's the best thing you could do.

I don't know what to say. I understand you. You abhor the world, I know, but doesn't the world you carry within you make up for that somewhat? My poor, dear little sister . . . You told me about how the struggle is what matters most, according to Saint Teresa,<sup>704</sup> so I'll say the same thing, and I say this to myself also . . . let us struggle against whatever we must, however we must.

I've had to interrupt my letter again. I'll continue now with greater peace and quiet. It's almost twelve o'clock. I have your last two letters in front of me, and I don't

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<sup>704</sup> “Do not stop on the road but, like the strong, fight even to death in the search, for you are not here for any other reason than to fight” (Saint Teresa of Ávila, *The Way of Perfection* chap. 20 par. 2, in *The Collected Works of Saint Teresa of Ávila* trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodríguez [Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1989], 2:114).

know where to begin. All I can tell you is that they have achieved what you set out to do; may God reward you.

Look, little sister, we ought never to complain. I won't anymore . . . You are very right when you say that I am leaving the world, which does not provide for the needs of the heart . . . the world, which is nothing in comparison to what the Lord is giving me. You are right, but if I were a saint, none of that would matter to me. Since I am not yet one, by the grace of God, don't be surprised that you found my last letter to be a little bit like me . . . I have a heart that suffers greatly when I see suffering around me, and it is full of love for my parents and brothers and sister, whom it has to leave behind . . . But look, pay me no mind.

You can't imagine how much consolation you gave me in your letters when you said that I've been somewhat useful to you, and that I truly understand you . . . When a soul loves God, I assure you, it doesn't need much wisdom in order to understand another soul that loves Him too . . . No, it doesn't need any at all. It's a most natural thing. You love the Lord very much, right? Well, so do I, and that's enough for us to be able to understand one another . . . What difference does the place or location make? The world is a very big place, it's enormous . . . When we look at God's greatness in His creation . . . we are so little! But when we look at Love, and nothing but Love . . . then the world seems very little . . . Everything disappears, and the soul expands . . . it flies to God, for there is no room for it here. If on the way it encounters another soul going through the same thing, what a consolation that is. Don't you think? . . .

How little everything is. The work of God is great and marvelous, but God Himself is infinitely more great and marvelous . . .

Don't look at your surroundings, don't focus on your suffering . . . it's all *little*, it's pathetic, it doesn't matter at all . . . Don't look at your consolation and joy either, they too are *little* and unimportant . . . Your soul is the work of God . . . but God is even greater than that . . . Don't stop, little sister. Keep going without fear, despite your tears, your worries, your misery, your consolations . . . Keep going . . . God and nothing else.

Some days I'm very happy, I don't know what is going on with me . . . Well, I do know . . . I know nothing except that God loves me, that's enough for me . . . Other days, when I see my parents and brothers and sister, I want to cry . . . Everything intensifies, and without wanting to, I start worrying. But neither my joy nor my sadness matters to me. I absolutely could not care less. I have to go beyond myself in order to get to God. I make an act of love for Him, and everything passes . . . It's necessary. How little everything is. I don't want to look at myself, I don't want to suffer or rejoice, it's all the same to me, I assure you . . . I want only to love God. I want only to give myself over to Him, so much so that even my very breath belongs to Him.

Listen, little sister, I can tell you're somewhat overwhelmed. I have been too . . . You sent me encouragement, and bless you for that, because you sent it in the name of Christ's love. I want to send you some right back . . . but don't you go explaining what exactly that encouragement *consists* of.

When someone is fighting, you encourage them with shouts. When someone is languishing and dying, you encourage them with medicine that rouses them . . . But when someone is suffering for the love of God . . . or *just* suffering, how do you encourage them? You don't, because in that very suffering . . . is everything they need. And if that

suffering does not appear all on its *own*, but rather accompanied by the love of God . . .

Then what more could you want, you happy mortal who are experiencing this?

I can't give you relief, and I don't want to . . . If you enter into agony for Christ's sake . . . Christ Himself will wipe away your tears and carry your cross for you. I don't know if I'm making sense, but I understand this very clearly.

You'll say that your suffering is *human* and so you need *human* help to withstand it. But I say to you . . . sanctify it with love for God and in God, and then . . . listen, little sister, you either understand me or you don't, but there are no words . . . But I can see from your letter that this is what's happening to you. As you receive this *joy of suffering*, you write me *crying* as you tell me your sorrows. At the same time, your soul is in a *special* state . . . and it possesses a special joy because it finds itself in such a state . . . Seeing all this, I understand you, and I am amazed that the same thing is happening to me.

Do you see now that you don't need me to encourage you? What for? Don't you see that God is working in your soul? Don't you see God's tenderness in your tears and woes? Don't you see God's greatness in your suffering? And isn't it true that you *thank* the Lord from the bottom of your heart for the way that He treats you, even if it makes you cry on a *human* level? . . . Yes, little sister, yes, all of humanity suffers, but there are so few who *know how* to suffer . . .

The one who lacks God needs consolation . . . but the one who loves God doesn't care for it.

What a joy it is, Lord, to love You like this . . . even if the world is falling apart, even if our hearts are shattered, even if our bodies suffer martyrdom . . . What does it all

matter? So long as You love us and we love You . . . *everything* else disappears. How great the Lord is, little sister . . . how great. Love Him deeply, never grow tired of Him . . . Love Him in suffering and in joy alike. There is no other wisdom, no other virtue, no other path. Don't you agree?

When I told my mother about Pilar and your worries, she started to cry<sup>705</sup> . . . And as I read your letter, I felt great pain as I thought about your worries and those of Uncle Polín, but I looked to the Lord . . . and I saw that His goodness is eternal . . . and that His works among creatures are of infinite greatness.

My poor brother and sister, if I could send you some of what I have within me . . . But then, you already have it too. All I can do is what you do for me, and that is send you the consolation of knowing that, united to you in the Lord and in Mary, *everything* is done for His love, and we wait in the peace of Love.

I only have a few days left in the world . . . And they are the most difficult ones yet. The Most Blessed Virgin is my strength.

I'll keep writing you, even if my letters turn out a bit messy, but I won't ask you for charity again . . . don't be angry, but sometimes I don't know what I'm saying, and I almost do everything mechanically . . . I'm very weak, little sister.

Now I'm going to leave you again, because it's getting very late.

December 27

I've just received your letter. It seems this letter is already getting too long to be able to answer yours.

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<sup>705</sup> Pilar Barón Osorio, María's daughter and Rafael's cousin, was sick at the time.

I'm so sorry about what's happening with Uncle Polín . . . May it all be for God. As I told you earlier, I'll go to Ávila. My father, my brother, and I will spend the night there, and then in the morning we'll go to Venta de Baños . . . Don't say a word to my grandmother. You understand.

And now I'm going to close this letter so that it gets to you tomorrow, and tonight I'll write you another note . . .

All my affection, your brother, who is very much united to you,

*Rafael*



**93. to María Osorio**

Oviedo, December 27, 1935

J-H-S

My dearest little sister,

I begin this letter in the name of Jesus and Mary, just as I promised in my last letter. It's eight o'clock at night and I just got back from the Carmelite chapel . . . Nobody else is home right now.

First, I'll fill you in on some of the little things, and what's going on at home . . . Then tonight, when everybody goes to bed, I'll talk to you about God . . . Everything is necessary, right?

Today I saw my doctor, and he said I was doing much better . . . Surely tomorrow I can reduce my dose of insulin . . . God is so good. I am much stronger . . . Thanks to my very strict nutrition plan, which I never make exceptions from . . . I do what I can for my recovery, because if I'm going to serve God in La Trapa, I'm going to need my health . . . I do it all in His name . . . My good Jesus knows very well that it's all for Him . . . I'm very happy.

My parents are very calm . . . My father more so than my mother . . . I told them that Father Abbot was going to have me study for ordination, and naturally, they're very pleased about that . . . I understand that it would be a great consolation to them to have a son who is a priest . . . Even if he's an oblate, that doesn't matter to them . . . They just want me to be happy, which they know I am at the Tabernacle's side . . . We are all very happy . . . It seems that the Virgin is at work in this house . . .

My father is more devout every day . . . He never misses even a day of Holy Communion and Mass . . . I don't know where he is right now, but since I went to the doctor's, I couldn't go with him to make our daily visit to the Lord.

On Christmas Eve, we all went to Midnight Mass at the Adoratrices' convent<sup>706</sup> . . . If only you could have seen it. The nuns do everything with such fervor . . . We heard all three Masses . . . and during the last two I was able to spend quite a bit of time with the Christ Child . . . I understand that it pains you to have to leave Him . . . You have to offer Him that . . . It was very hard for me to leave Him too . . . even if we don't make noise at home . . . we do eat right afterwards, and it's so good to be with Mother and Child at the little stable in Bethlehem, isn't it?

But don't let it trouble you. Remember when I was in Ávila and I told you that when you left after Communion . . . or after a Visit, anytime you had to leave the temple, you didn't have to leave your heart at the Tabernacle? Rather, I said, it's better to ask the

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<sup>706</sup> *Adoratrices' convent*: the Sisters Adorers Handmaids of the Blessed Sacrament and of Charity

(*Adoratrices Esclavas del Santísimo Sacramento y de la Caridad*), known as the "Adoratrices," were founded in Spain by Saint María Micaela Desmaisieres in 1856 to run women's shelters. Their convent in Oviedo, located at the foot of Monte Naranco, was destroyed in October 1937 during the Spanish Civil War (see Foto Delespro, *Barrio de las Adoratrices destruido* [Delegación del Estado para Prensa y Propaganda, 1937], photo 40).

Lord to come with you . . . Remember that? It often pains me to have to leave behind my prayer of thanksgiving after receiving Communion . . . but since I can't spend hours and hours in church with the Lord, that's what I do . . . I ask the Lord to come with me, and He does, little sister . . . have no doubt.

How fortunate you are that both Uncle Polín and Pilar are bedridden . . . Take this to heart: the Lord has put them there entirely so that you might have an occasion to practice the charity that He is asking of you, so that you might love Him by taking care of your loved ones . . . Everything that is happening around you—the Lord is doing all that for you, didn't you know? Don't put obstacles in His path, little sister! . . . Look up high, so you won't get dizzy. If a chasm suddenly opens up underneath your feet, and the world starts falling apart, but your eyes are still fixed on God . . . then what's it to you? . . . But if you look down into that chasm, you run the risk of getting dizzy . . . and falling in.

I don't know if I led you toward the Child Jesus or not, but when I was with Him I did talk to Him about you. I don't remember what I said to Him . . .

When you write me, don't stop updating me on how Uncle Polín is doing. We'll see if the Lord wants me to say goodbye at his bedside again, just like I did two years ago. Well, things are different now.

I can't wait for these days to be over already, if only you knew . . . I don't intend to say goodbye to anybody.

I haven't told Mamá anything about my grandmother, just that they're going to Ávila one of these days, but I imagine that Mamá will send them something . . . She shouldn't worry so much . . . Everything will be resolved, and everyone will do what they can . . . Her old age is quite sad. May it all serve God.

I suppose my mother and sister will go to Burgos. For now they've canceled their trip to Lisbon. It turned out to be too expensive and too far. They'll be away for a few months, and they'll start in Burgos, but they haven't decided anything yet. It's very hard for them to leave home, but Merceditas needs it . . .

If only you knew how often we think of Pilar . . . But don't worry, the Lord will fix everything . . . Remember, everything is for your sake. You ought to be so happy, He loves you so much, you don't even know.

I was so sorry not to be able to write you at length on Christmas Eve . . . But if what few words I did write were useful to you at all . . . blessed be the Lord.

Tell Uncle Polín that one of these days I'll send him what I promised.

You asked me if I regret having given myself over to God entirely . . . You say such things, sister . . . I have nothing to say to that.

I've just picked up my pen again. It's midnight (my best hour, as always). My father and brothers haven't gone to bed yet, they're listening to the radio.

In your letter, you asked me to talk about love for God . . . well, little sister, I don't know . . . I assure you, I don't know how to talk to you about God . . . What do you want me to say? . . . I know that it is the one thing that can satisfy you, the only thing in my letters that could be of any interest to you . . . But I'm going to confess something very strange to you . . . as I said, whenever I want to talk about God, I can't think of anything to say. When I think about Him, I am stupefied . . . I don't know how to explain it . . . but the truth is I can't think of anything to say.

I just wish I could transfer my entire soul onto paper. When I see how paltry my words are, I become very overwhelmed . . . such little things, for so great a purpose . . .

But anyway, if you've ever received a spark or two, it's been without my knowledge . . . Or rather, I do know about it, but . . . I don't know how to explain myself. It's easy for me to get excited when I write you about God, because I know that I'm not speaking into the void, because I know that you understand me. I know that you receive this love I have for God—which whether it be great or small, is true . . . Don't you laugh at me, or act all *surprised* . . . it's only natural, the way I can pour out my soul to you . . . it happens on its own. These suppressed shouts reach God; yes, I do believe they reach Jesus . . .

You alone know so many things about me and God, so many things that the world would laugh at if they found out. The world doesn't know what it is to love God, it just doesn't, it has no clue . . . but you do. That fills me with joy, and consoles me more than you know.

In La Trapa, in silence with my brothers . . . all my affection for God, all the love contained in my soul, will rise up to God in silence and through Our Lady's intercession. But it has been Jesus's desire in these last few days to show me clearly that there are souls in this world who may not be in a convent, but they too suffer and rejoice and want nothing more than to love . . . to love God, to melt, to sink ever more deeply into love for God, which is the only reason in the world to exist. How great is the Lord, little sister; look at how He treats us, and you won't even be able to breathe.

Today was a day very much spent *in the world*, very much as a creature . . . I see nothing but creatures who don't know God. It causes me great sorrow. It's all useless conversations, worldly business, material interests . . . nothing about God, nothing about Jesus, nothing about the newborn Child who offers us love in exchange for love. The world doesn't understand these feast days. There's nothing but noise and festivities . . .

but human festivities. Nobody is thinking about Mary's anguish, Joseph's tenderness, the Christ Child calling out to humankind from the humble stable with His little arms wide open . . . It pains me. I see Him. As poor and miserable as I am, I want to make up for all the love I don't see in others. It makes me so sad . . .

On the other hand, it fills me with joy. For what have I done, that God should give me a heart that, despite all its faults, can hold a bit of love, a bit of that love that Jesus is so sweetly asking for?

For me, everything is a cause for rejoicing and suffering . . . and when I find myself like this . . . alone . . . alone with my love for God . . . I receive a letter from a creature, from a soul who is a child of God just like me, and amid her hardships and sorrows, she says to me, "Brother, speak to me of God's love . . . write me what you know of God. I ask nothing more, I want nothing more."

What a great consolation, little sister! A consolation only known to those who truly live the intense love for God that makes them say crazy things, and whose souls, no matter how much they want to express, don't know what to say, and fall silent!! . . . What can I say? I can just keep quiet, not knowing what to say . . . So much has been written about love for God . . . so much. The saints have put all their wisdom into their books, and I can't find anything in them that satisfies me. It's all fragments, vague reflections of what love for God truly is . . . And if the saints haven't known what to say . . . then what will we poor souls do?

Oh, little sister! Such things you ask for. You almost cause me to suffer. I can see what you need, I can see how you're doing. I understand that your soul is only asking for love, and knows only how to love . . . and you come asking me, poor man that I am . . . a

miserable creature, you ask me for light in order to love Jesus of Nazareth, who just in these past few days came into our world, begging for exactly what you're asking for . . . love.

My poor little sister, look who you've wound up with. God is so good! How happily I go to La Trapa . . . ! I love You so much, Lord, I am so happy, the world doesn't know . . . Sometimes I want to jump up and down, I'm telling you, little sister . . . I'm crazy, I don't know what's happening to me . . . Might that be love for God?

Oh my God, how the angels must be delighting in You in heaven . . . To think that I'll be with them soon, it makes me feel something that essentially makes me forget everything . . . If only you knew, sometimes I laugh inside when I see the pained faces of some people when they learn I'm going to La Trapa . . . They can't conceive of it. They think I've gone mad. It makes me want to shout, "You dimwits, can't you see that I just love Jesus so much? Can't you see that it's God? You don't know what it is to love God! Don't you pity me, don't you cry, don't you go worrying, even if I were to die . . . I'd do it a thousand times over again if I had a thousand lives to live."

How great is the Lord, little sister. What things He does!

Laugh and jump for joy with me. We'll sing carols at the stable, and you'll see, the Child Jesus will laugh too, and He'll reach out to us with His little arms . . . What a joy! The Virgin will laugh too, and the patriarch, Saint Joseph, will look at us. What jubilation we'll bring! . . . The shepherds, the wise men, the stars and the sky, all will laugh, all will sing. It is Jesus who has been born . . . We'll sing too . . . Leave all your sorrows at the Child's feet, all your worries and joys too, leave everything there . . . and free of it all, with your arms relieved of their burden and your heart clear of its obstacles .

. . look at Jesus, little sister. He asks nothing of you. He wants only for you to love Him a little, show Him a little tenderness . . .

Let us sing with all creation, the animals and plants . . . Jesus is laughing, and so is Mary. Let's help our Blessed Mother forget Her woe when She was abandoned by others, when She and Joseph did not find shelter . . . Let's help Mary forget Her sorrows. Let us love Her Son, don't let Him get cold . . . Let's not make noise, He's sleeping . . . it's Jesus, the blessed Child . . . He was just born and He loves us already, He knows us already. . . His pale little face is already smiling . . . What great tenderness, sister! Let us keep quiet, for Jesus is sleeping, and He is sleeping in our arms . . . ! What a joy! How sweet His breathing is . . . ! Mary is looking at us. She is not afraid to leave Him with us, because She knows that we love Him, and that we are cradling Him in our arms with tremendous affection . . . How sweet this Child is! And this Child Jesus is God . . . He is our God.

Oh, dear sister, what a great joy it is to have a God like ours.

Forget everything. Let nothing worry you. Sing carols, but sing them in your heart, without anyone else being able to overhear . . . you'll see, it'll be good. This newborn Child loves you so much! Don't tell Him about your sorrows, leave those for you . . . just give Him love, nothing but love. You'll see, He'll laugh and give you hugs, and the Virgin will help you . . . Love, love, that's what Jesus wants.

Well, I'll leave it there for now because it's getting very late. I'm going to fall asleep thinking about everything I just said to you . . . Blessed be God, how happy I am.



I have nothing but reasons to praise God. It is noon on a splendid day. I took the car out alone, stopped at an overlook, and thinking of God, being reminded of you, I delight in writing.

How great You are, Lord, in Your works! . . . You have made all this for me . . . the earth, the sky, the birds, such peace in the air! . . . Lord, if people saw You in creation, if they looked up occasionally at the sky You created, I'm sure that they would be better people . . . It's impossible to be a bad person while loving the countryside, the sea, the works of Your hands. Lord, if people loved You, how happy the world would be. How great You are, Lord!

My dear little sister, right now I lack the words to share with you this peace I have . . . With all my heart, I wish the same for you. When I think of God for any reason . . . I am so utterly flooded that death would seem small by comparison.

Why, Lord, are You keeping me here? Everything speaks to me of what You are, everything points me toward You, but it is all a weak reflection of Your goodness and love. It is all the work of Your hands, and that is why I love the whole world . . . but all that . . . it's not You . . . Lord, pay me no mind, understand that sometimes my soul asks for things . . . Lord, silence is best . . . Love and silence.

Sunday, December 29

Yesterday I left this abruptly. I didn't know what to say, and I started to walk along the highway. I wanted to keep writing last night . . . but I was with my father and brothers until very late . . . I can't wait for these days to be over . . . I'm somewhat uncomfortable at home . . . Every time my mother looks at me, she gets sad, I can tell,

even though she doesn't say anything. Yesterday I told my father that I didn't want to delay my departure. As soon as I've finished with the dentist, I'm going to decide. I'd been thinking January 8 . . . we'll see.

Pray for me, little sister. This *slow goodbye* to everything . . . is somewhat hard on me, and sometimes I sin against patience, it can't be helped.

I won't write you very much today, because I want this letter to go out today.

I don't know how you'll interpret these messy letters of mine, but you'll have to manage it. It's all ups and downs, and until I find myself with a bit of silence again and the troubled waters of my soul are made still, that's all I will be able to do.

For today, then, I'll leave you, until next time. Through the Virgin Mary, receive all my affection as your brother,

*Brother María Rafael, O.C.S.O.*

**94. to María Osorio**

Oviedo, December 29, 1935

J-H-S

My dearest sister in the Lord,

I am beginning another letter now that it is evening. As you can see, this'll sound more like a diary than anything else.

This afternoon, I thought about you a lot while I was at prayer. I went to the Dominican chapel at seven, because they keep it open until nine.

When I left the house, I was a bit sad, because I was going alone. It was entertainment time, and I felt like a stranger in the crowd. Everyone was busy with the cinema and theater, and meanwhile, the Lord was waiting all alone in the Tabernacle . . . It caused me great sorrow. The world doesn't know that Jesus is among us . . . it doesn't know that Christ is in the Tabernacle and does nothing but wait for His children to come over for a little while to be with Him . . . even if it's just for a minute. What a shame, little sister. What a shame.

I saw that the Lord was alone in the Tabernacle, and I found myself alone too as I went to keep Him company.

But then suddenly everything changed. It was as if the angels were guiding me through the streets . . . they encouraged me, and told me not to worry, that it was in prayerful recollection that I could be pleasing to God . . . and that I should be very happy, because it was God and Mary who were calling me . . . that I should leave these creatures be, and that there was no comparison between what the Lord was going to give me at His

side and what the world was so eagerly searching for—diversion, delight for the senses, etc.

If only you could have seen it. I was so encouraged by this that I started to cross through the streets without even realizing it. I united myself to the angels and told them, “You’re right, God is so good, I am so happy.”

I spent an hour at church, most of it with Our Lady . . . If only you knew, little sister, how much She loves me. I thought of you. I was deep in recollection. It had been a long time since I had been like that. Tomorrow I’m going to go back at the same time. It’s Our Lady of the Rosary. She’s holding the Child Jesus in her arms, and She’s in a side chapel that’s very well cared for by the confraternity.<sup>707</sup>

By the way, during my last few moments there, a girl went up to the altar on her knees, and when she reached it, she held out her arms in a cross, and I heard her crying as she looked up at the Virgin. I nearly cried too. She must have had a very great sorrow that she was bringing before Our Lady. I was greatly edified, and I also prayed that the Virgin would hear her . . . I believe that She will. If only you knew, the Virgin is so good. There is no sorrow She will not sweeten, and no joy She will not sanctify . . .

I’m telling you, if we always turned to Mary, things would be different for us. She has always been helpful to me, in so many things; I owe nearly everything to her, including my vocation. Loving Mary is so sweet! . . . You’ll see, the Virgin will resolve

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<sup>707</sup> *Confraternity*: An association of laypeople, often under the patronage of a particular saint or title of Jesus or Mary (in this case, Our Lady of the Rosary).

your concerns for you, I'm sure of it. Look, you have to come help me by Her side. Two heads are better than one, don't you think?

In your last letter, you mentioned that you were experiencing some nervousness, perhaps of a physical origin. I don't know about that, but look, don't deceive yourself . . . Can you not master yourself? I think you can, give it a try, once, twice . . . twenty times. You'll see, it'll pass . . .

A year ago, one of my confessors told me the same thing. He said I had a nervous imbalance because of the revolution.<sup>708</sup> Maybe, but I never believed it . . . I would enter a church and not be able to stay there, it would make me too anxious. Everything irritated me. One time I went to confession crying because I *couldn't* make my examination of conscience, and I felt like such a sinner.

Do you know what convinced me there was no such physical disorder? Well it's very simple: that would only happen with things concerning God and religion, while I never got agitated about *anything else*. Try to follow this. For example: if I had to perform an act of patience or charity toward my neighbor, I could not do it . . . everything irritated me on the inside, and nothing came out right. On the other hand, if it was an action that was pleasing or flattering to me in some way . . . then I could be normal . . . That is, I was normal and ordinary when it came to the things of this world and its diversions, but on the other hand, I had this stupid nervous anxiety when it came to the things of God. No, my confessor was wrong, I could tell right away. He said that it was

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<sup>708</sup> During the Revolution of 1934, Rafael witnessed a great deal of violence and destruction in Oviedo (see Letter 55 and Manuscript 56).

because of my illness, having to leave the monastery, my sister, those nine days of fires and looting, etc. Well, sure, that's all true, but in that case I would have gone entirely crazy, not just *partially* . . . right?

It passed, just as everything passes, even the temptations that God permits to go as far as they do . . . Don't pay me any mind, but I think you possess a great ability to endure suffering (well, you don't possess it, it has been given to you) . . . Consider what is happening to you carefully, and don't let the same thing happen to you that happened to me.

Well, don't take that too literally . . . Pay me no mind. The Lord deals with our souls according to our needs, which are not all the same. But sometimes we use one thing as a pretext to fall into something else entirely, and we shouldn't do that . . . Instead, turn to Our Lady, so that She can tell you what you ought to do. I'm sure you'll recover your usual composure, despite it all.

The clock has just struck twelve, so I'm going to leave it there, because I'm a bit sleepy. I'll continue tomorrow, Monday, when I'm expecting a letter from you . . . Now that I'm thinking about it, if I can, I'll make my Visit from three to four o'clock on Friday at a solitary Tabernacle, and then again at night, from two to three o'clock, at home. Will you do the same? I'm not going to pray for anything or say anything, I'm just going to *be* there, so you can be the one to choose our intention. Are we agreed?

Until tomorrow, little sister, God willing.

December 30

I just came back from being with the Lord . . . I have nothing new to say. It's eight o'clock at night. I received your letter, along with that of Uncle Polín. You can't imagine how much they've cheered me up . . . You are both so good to me! I don't deserve any of it. Truly, not at all worth the effort.

I don't know if I'll be able to write tonight because I have to draw . . . I've got it all prepared now. As I said, it's a Saint Francis of Assisi, patron of the Forest Engineers<sup>709</sup> . . . My father is very excited and wants it to turn out well. It's going to be one of my last drawings, at least at home . . . In La Trapa, who knows. It's all the same to me.

I agree with everything you said in your letter . . . Don't worry about what you choose to discuss with me. You are writing me, and you write about yourself . . . that's only natural, we always let out whatever we're carrying inside, and you shouldn't try to force yourself to talk about something else. Even though you're saying it all to a mere creature, I won't share what you say here with anyone but God. Be at peace, little sister. I am too, and I don't worry about this.

I've just taken up my pen again. I'm telling you, I can't get ten minutes in a row. It's twelve o'clock. I drew for a while . . . and before going to bed . . . I thought, I'm going to write a bit . . .

Just one thing: Don't get too excited about my stay in Ávila. I'm going to try to have us leave Oviedo very early . . . If possible, at dawn . . . The worst thing about it is the question of Holy Mass . . . I don't know, we'll see. On the other hand, my mother . . .

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<sup>709</sup> See Fig. 5 at the end of this letter.

Anyway, it'll all be very quick, most likely we won't be able to talk at all. Offer it up to the Lord . . . Don't you think we've talked plenty already? . . . Oh poor little sister, one can never exhaust the subject of God, isn't that so? But don't you worry. The souls of those who love God are forever united, and often, words tarnish feelings . . .

Be generous, my dear sister. What's it to us, so long as the silence we offer serves God? You'll see, one day, when you come to La Trapa . . . we won't even be able to speak. Or maybe we'll talk each other's ears off, who knows! . . . Let us do each day's work and nothing more . . . Today I can write you, so I write you. Tomorrow I can see you, so I'll see you. After that . . . well, is that up to us? . . . Everything is so fleeting.

I'm so glad about your state of mind . . . Don't let the storms and squalls trouble you. You have Mary, don't you? . . . Of course, it would be easier to lead a calm life, never offending God, a life without complications as you'd say . . . But do you have any now? . . . Is loving God that complicated? . . . Please, little sister. How could we lead *calm* lives, possessing what we possess? . . . It would be impossible . . . We can't let our love for God sit still . . . More, always . . . always more. We must never abandon the fight, even if it's difficult . . . The day will come when we can truly possess that still, calm love . . . But on that day, we'll be in heaven. In the meantime, let's not seek out calmness. Let's never stop. Let's keep moving forward, fighting against ourselves in order to banish that "self" who does us so much harm . . .

Let us love God more and more, always . . . Let us not settle for less. And if one day we catch fire . . . isn't that what we are looking for? . . . We're going to follow Jesus, we're going to follow in His footsteps . . . and Jesus didn't rest . . . even after His death, they thrust a spear into His side.



I know what you'll say, because I know you . . . "But if only a little bit is enough for me . . . but if I'm satisfied with just a crumb . . ." Yes, little sister, yes. At first, a crumb is enough. But soon, the whole loaf won't fill you up . . . Don't put obstacles in the Lord's way. Let Him work . . . Don't you go thinking it's arrogant or lacking humility to court His love . . . and to court His love in abundance, in excess, until it undoes you completely . . . The other way is easier, more comfortable, perhaps more comforting.

But let's not seek out comfort . . . We'll have it in the end. Meanwhile, let's be generous . . . Let us open our hearts to God without reservation, without holding anything back. Between God and Mary, may He do what He wishes with us . . . If suffering, then suffering; if rejoicing, then rejoicing. What's it to us? . . . God is great and we are nothing.

Don't you worry. You'll see, the day I give you a hug and head off to La Trapa, there won't be any tears . . . we don't suffer. Why? We'll proclaim that *sursum corda* I like so much, and you'll see how joyfully you respond<sup>710</sup> . . . "Yes, brother, yes, go in peace . . . My heart has been lifted up to the Lord . . ." And that's all. Then, if our eyes of flesh saw with the eyes of faith, we'd see all the choirs of angels singing to the Lord with great rejoicing upon seeing that here on earth, despite all its misery, there are still a few hearts that belong to God alone. And Our Lady will rejoice, and She will help us so much that we'll almost physically feel it. You'll see.

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<sup>710</sup> *Sursum corda*: "Lift up your hearts"; in the Mass, it prompts the response "We lift them up to the Lord." See Letter 63.

Well, that's all for now. I'm going to bed. I don't want to keep my head in the clouds like a fool . . . Like I said before, let us do each day's work and nothing more, and all through the Virgin Mary, always.

I'll barely have time to write you even a quick note tomorrow, and besides, if I do manage to write one I'd like it to be addressed to Uncle Polín. So, be satisfied with what your little brother is sending you for today, which is all his love,

*Brother María Rafael, O.C.S.O.*



Fig. 6<sup>711</sup>

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<sup>711</sup> Rafael painted this watercolor of Saint Francis of Assisi for his father. Image source: Antonio Cobos Soto, *La "pintura mensaje" del hermano Rafael* (Burgos: Monte Carmelo y Monasterio Cisterciense de San Isidro de Dueñas, 1989), 203.

**95. to Fr. José Olmedo**<sup>712</sup>

Oviedo, January 3, 1936

J-H-S

My dear Father Master,

At last, the day approaches when I will return to my beloved Trapa once more. We still have not set the date, but it will be approximately after Epiphany. In any case, I'll give you a few days' notice.

For now, I merely request that you inform me as to what I should bring in terms of clothing . . . I remember what I brought last time, but not in detail.

I wanted to ask if I can bring books that I use for prayer and meditation . . . It would be about three or four, but I can also go without them. It is up to you.

I would also appreciate it if you could ask Br. Ramón which books he asked his brother Juan for when they saw each other a few days ago.<sup>713</sup> His family has asked me to inquire if he needs anything else, so that I can bring it for him.

As for my "papers" or documents, everything is already at the monastery.

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<sup>712</sup> Father José Olmedo Arrieta (1892–1967) replaced Fr. Marcelo León as master of novices at San Isidro on July 7, 1935, after the latter had fallen ill. Unlike his predecessor, Olmedo did not have any particular affection for Rafael and was not in favor of his re-admission into La Trapa (OC 569).

<sup>713</sup> Br. Ramón Vallauré Fernández-Peña was a novice at La Trapa (see Dedication 38), and his brother Juan was Rafael's close friend (see Letter 9).

I have nothing else to tell you, dear Father . . . just that I am counting the days until I am back in the community. I just ask you to tell the novices, and I ask this of you as well, to remember my poor self in prayer in the coming days, for I am battling many things right now . . . and truly, I need it. Although I can assure you that the Virgin Mary is helping me . . . in the way only She knows how.

Give Father Abbot and the whole community my regards, and those of my parents. Counting on your blessing and your prayers, your novice,

*Brother María Rafael*

*O.C.S.O.*

96. to W. Marino del Hierro<sup>714</sup>

Oviedo, January 3, 1936

My dear friend and brother Marino,

What must you think of me? . . . I am ashamed to write you, but you must forgive me. This year has been such that it would've been impossible for me to have anything to say to you . . . I've picked up my pen to write you a few times . . . but I couldn't. Maybe you won't understand . . . but I haven't even written to La Trapa.

Now things are different, and I'm only writing you to say goodbye . . . around January 8 or 10, I'll be returning to the monastery . . . Of course, I'm thrilled . . . Toribio sends his regards<sup>715</sup> . . . I'm not completely recovered yet, and I have to keep following my diet . . . I'll carry on with it there, and I'll never leave again . . . if we ever meet, blessed be God, and if not, I'll see you in heaven.

Forgive this poor soul who has behaved so poorly toward you, but nevertheless begs the Virgin to help you with whatever you need . . . I won't forget.

I have nothing more to say . . . as you can see, it's rather little.

A big hug from your good friend and brother in Jesus and Mary,

*Br. M. Rafael*

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<sup>714</sup> W. Marino del Hierro was an acquaintance of Rafael's by way of their mutual friend Toribio Luis Arribas. Under his religious name, Brother Tescelino, Arribas was the assistant infirmarian at San Isidro during Rafael's first stay at La Trapa (see Letter 44).

<sup>715</sup> Toribio Luis Arribas (see previous note).

97. to María Osorio

Oviedo, January 3, 1936

J-H-S

My dearest little sister,

I received your letter, and you have no idea how pleased I am that Pilar is doing better.<sup>716</sup> Of course, it's a long road . . . but the Lord will resolve everything . . . you'll see.

Yesterday I sent Uncle Polín some photographs of La Trapa.<sup>717</sup> Juan took them, he's the novice Ramón's brother.<sup>718</sup> Even though they aren't worth anything, I thought Uncle Polín would like them.

Today is Friday, and I went out to take a walk. It's eleven in the morning, and even if it ends up just being a quick note, I'm writing you so that this letter can go out today. I have nothing new to tell you . . . This afternoon I'll go to the Salesian church,<sup>719</sup> and from there, I'll help you however I can.

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<sup>716</sup> *Pilar*: Pilar Barón Osorio, María's daughter and Rafael's cousin.

<sup>717</sup> If Rafael included a letter with the photographs he sent his uncle, it has not been preserved.

<sup>718</sup> Br. Ramón Vallauré Fernández-Peña was a novice at La Trapa (see Dedication 38), and his brother Juan was Rafael's close friend (see Letter 9).

<sup>719</sup> The Church of the Sacred Heart of Jesus (see note on the Salesian church in Letter 75).

Today I wrote to Father Master to firm up the details of my departure . . . I'm a bit impatient, it can't be helped, but I'm telling you, I consider myself the happiest man on earth . . . Yesterday, when I left after spending time with Our Lady, I was half mad as I left the church . . . Although I'm telling you, my prayer is very strange . . . I don't know how to pray. Time just flies by while I think about La Trapa, and think about how the Lord is waiting for me . . . and how Mary is waiting for me, and how the angels are waiting for me in the choir there, and honestly not knowing how to thank the Lord for all His benefits<sup>720</sup> . . . I begin to feel such a great joy, and I don't know what to do.

At home everyone is very calm and content. Nothing is difficult for the Lord. I can assure you that He is the one doing everything.

Listen, little sister, I'm very glad that you're getting your usual peace back, a little at a time. Of course, I think they're temptations. Ask Our Lady to help you, and you'll see, everything will pass.

Listen, I'm going to leave it there for now. I'm writing from inside the car, it's splendidly sunny out . . . and extraordinarily peaceful. I'm going to take a walk along the road. Later, at twelve o'clock, I'll make my Visit. After I get back from prayer, I'll continue writing for a bit this afternoon. Then I'll go to the dentist. Then I'll go back to the Dominican chapel for some more prayer time. Then tonight, at two o'clock, I'll come to your assistance again . . . My God, how boring I am.

I just came home and got your letter . . . may God reward you for everything . . . you poor thing, I'm still laughing . . . blessed be God.

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<sup>720</sup> *Bless the Lord, O my soul, and do not forget all his benefits* (Ps 103:2).



Look, in accordance with today's intention, I'll do as you said . . . As for what I'd like for dinner, I'll tell you soon. Don't lose your patience on me, but I'll tell you in detail, even down to the wine . . . You're so funny. God reward your generosity.

My family's coming home now. Talk to you soon.

January 4

My dearest sister,

Today, January 4, I'll continue. Yesterday it was impossible for me to string even two sentences together. I felt really bad, because I wanted you to get this letter today.

I did everything just as I said before, although my nighttime Holy Hour turned into a holy half-hour. It turned out that I didn't go to bed, so by two-thirty, I physically could not stay awake. Anyway, I do what I can.

I have so many things I'd like to write you, plus everything you asked about . . . but I'm telling you, I'm getting more scatterbrained by the day . . . Nothing to be done about that.

Yesterday I was talking with my parents and we agreed that if I finish up with the dentist on Tuesday, I'll leave Wednesday or Thursday.<sup>721</sup>

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<sup>721</sup> Ultimately, Rafael left Oviedo on Thursday, January 9, with his father and brother Leopoldo.

Fernando is leaving for Leuven on Monday, January 6.<sup>722</sup> What's happening is that we're all really feeling our impending separation . . . so we're *all* getting antsy for things to get back to normal. I'm going to write you yet another letter; I don't know what for, but anyway, you understand, right?

I'm *impossible* these days, whether I'm up or down, though generally I'm always down. Our Lady permits this, may She be blessed. She wants me to absorb everything, and She has heightened my sensitivity. I'm wound tighter than a guitar. You'll be able to forgive me, won't you?

It's very hard for me to leave home, but on the other hand, I long to. Anyway, God alone.

Oh, little sister, I can't think of anything to say . . . God and God alone . . . I don't know . . . the world is so clingy.

Anyway, just reply to me one last time . . . just to this letter, if it can be called that. But don't write me after that, because we might miss each other, and I wouldn't receive it either here or there, and I don't want your letters to *get lost*, do you understand? But mine are another matter, I'll keep telling you everything until the very last minute, even if you already know it all.

Is my grandmother in Ávila? I thought about writing Uncle Polín, but I didn't. Tell him so . . . I'll see him in a few days.

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<sup>722</sup> Rafael's brother Luis Fernando was completing his university studies in Leuven, Belgium.

Well, don't you worry on my account. I'm a bit selfish, and not at all generous. God wills it thus, or at least He permits it. I seem empty, don't I?

Well, I have nothing else to tell you. Help me a little before Our Lady of the Rosary. I go to be with Her every afternoon, and if only you knew how much She encourages and helps me . . .

I can't say anything more. I'm sending you so many things in this letter, just not with words, which aren't coming to me today. It doesn't matter, it's all the same.

I'll tell you what I want for dinner soon.

A very big hug from your brother,

*Brother María Rafael, O.C.S.O.*

98. to María Osorio

Oviedo, January 4, 1936

J-H-S

My dearest little sister,

Just like the other day, I'm starting this letter in the waiting room at the dentist's. Sometimes I have to spend a lot of time waiting, and this way I'm using it well.

I got your letter, and Uncle Polín's. I knew he'd like the photos.

Listen, don't worry about being left all alone, as you said. When you truly want to love and serve God, you are never alone . . . You'll see, He'll arrange things so that you find help, *if you need it*. That is, if according to Him you need it, not according to *you*. Understand? . . . We poor creatures know and understand nothing on that front . . . and we are generally mistaken, believing we see a need when perhaps there isn't one. Don't you think so?

During this time, which we can now say has come to an end, we've helped each other . . . We'll always have, or at least I will, the memory of God's tenderness, which comes to us when we aren't expecting it, and often from whom we least expect it . . . What's that to us? Creatures are nothing more than a means, and God is the end.

So remain calm, don't worry, the Lord never abandons His children, least of all His most beloved children . . . and have no doubt, we are among them . . . and I'm not being presumptuous. I don't think that because of my merits. I'm just utterly convinced that the Lord loves me very much, I don't know why.

It's as I said, the help we've given one another came to us from Him. If He's taking it away from us now, it's because we don't need it anymore . . . When He treats us like this, it's because He has seen that we are frail and weak . . . and since He loves us, He helped us, He used others to give us light for our path . . . He strengthened us on the cross, He stretched our hearts so that we could love Him, He consoled us as He does the weak. What is there left to do now? Nothing, little sister. Don't stop, remember not to "gather flowers" and keep advancing in love. That is what the Lord wanted to show us. Did we learn it? Yes, of course . . . let's go then. During my first few days at La Trapa, they taught me how to use the hoe . . . Once I'd learned how, they left me on my own.

Now it's the same thing. The Lord gave us a lesson. He showed us how to use the tool with which we are to work, and that is love . . . Well then, now let's love, and nothing more. Don't worry about all the details, they're insignificant.

If you ever fail, then the divine Master will once more lovingly attend you, and once more He'll give you what He gave you just now. Don't ask Him; He already knows what you need and when you need it.

Listen, little sister, if you really believe that I've helped you, you're mistaken. I know you don't see it this way . . . but in order to *complete* God's work, you need to move past me, because I am nothing . . . Don't think about me except to pray for me from time to time . . . And if you have affection toward me, take it away from me and give it to God. Don't think I'm being harsh. As a *human* creature, it's hard for me to say that to you . . . but as a Trappist, who is also human, but has a bit more of God's spirit, I beg it of you.

His work must be completed. No longer look to me for consolation that I cannot give you. I'd rather you ask the help of God, whom you love so much . . . Don't expect *anything* from human beings, even the holiest among them, because the more you expect of them . . . the greater your disappointment will eventually be.

Place your hope in God, your consolation in God, and all your love in God. Then you'll see, nothing will be difficult for you, not even loneliness, because being alone with God . . . may in fact be the summit of the mount. Do you know what I mean?<sup>723</sup>

Today I wasn't able to go see the Virgin. I finished up with the dentist at nine, and then I came home. He told me we'd be finished on Monday. We'll see if I can leave here on Tuesday or Wednesday. I'm still waiting on a letter from La Trapa. I'm telling you, sometimes I get a bit nervous. It can't be helped. Sometimes I even start physically shaking.

Little sister, it's turning out to be so difficult for me to master my poor nature . . . anyway, that's of no importance.

In order to demonstrate that I'm exactly as you want me to be, I'll tell you what we're going to have for dinner: exactly what I have for dinner every day. I don't want to deviate from my diet. Any vegetable, maybe green beans with tomatoes or boiled cabbage; whatever vegetable you want. Then I have a soft-boiled egg, and then either meat or fish, either is fine. A glass of any wine (nothing special), some water, and no bread. Most days I don't eat dessert, what for? And if I do, I have an apple.

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<sup>723</sup> Rafael is referring to the "mount of perfection" envisioned by Saint John of the Cross, a text that he and María had discussed before (see Letter 40).

As you can see, it's pretty simple. If I weren't sick, just the vegetable and glass of wine would be enough for me, I can assure you. But anyway, it doesn't worry me in the slightest. It's God's will that I can't do that right now, so, very well then . . . I'll humble this poor body by treating it well. Since it already knows exactly how much it deserves, I'll make it blush with shame.

As you can see, you can do penance by eating chicken just as well as you can do it by eating root vegetables . . . It's a matter of doing so with great love for God. Don't you think? You'll do this for me, won't you? Remember who it is you're having over for dinner, just a poor man passing through this world, stopping by in order to be able to continue on his way. Don't you worry about him.

What a poor man I am . . . If only you knew how grateful I am for your gentleness toward me. The Lord gives us such gifts! Isn't it true, little sister, that the cross is gentle? Of course it is. I can't complain. I won't stop to gather flowers, but I will smell them, and I'll thank the Lord for them from the depths of my soul. Not everything is thorns, not everything is tears. It's just that everything is necessary to create harmony in God's works. Everything is so good! Not a single detail is missing . . . and when the Lord grants us the light we need to be able to appreciate them . . . I can assure you, it brings great joy. The Lord made the night, but He added stars . . . if someone is short-sighted, perhaps they just can't see the stars.

May Jesus always grant us light to see, and ears to hear.

January 5

My dear little sister,

It is currently one-thirty in the morning. We all went to our rooms late, because we have to get up at the crack of dawn tomorrow. Fernando is leaving, and we have to go hear Holy Mass beforehand.

I haven't had time to write you even a sentence or two today, and it'll get harder and harder by the day. Still, I won't fail to put down a few words for you today.

My father is somewhat sad . . . Fernando will be the first one to leave. With every passing hour . . . what am I telling you this for? God alone.

I am so happy to see how gentle sorrows become when they are directed toward and focused on God . . . Thanks to Mary, under whose special protection this home rests, we are carrying on with a spirit that must truly be pleasing to God . . .

Pardon my selfishness, sister. What else could I talk to you about right now, other than my parents and brothers and sister? I am neither affectionate nor forthcoming . . . but I can see clearly that God has given me a heart for two things only: first and foremost, in order to love Him, and Him alone . . . and also to suffer. I'm very happy, little sister, as God knows . . . I'm not complaining. It is a special grace that He is working in me. Blessed be God.

I don't know if I have come to love suffering. I don't think so. But on the other hand, I'm telling you, despite my very human tears, I wouldn't trade positions with anyone for anything . . . I am happy, despite all my great weaknesses . . . And the more wretched and less generous I am, the more I love God, and the more motivated I am to follow this path that terrifies me somewhat when I consider it from a human perspective. But then I look at the Virgin, I look at the world, I contemplate God, and all those tears, bitter though they may be, fill me with peace, because they are for Him and they reach



Him. And then . . . what can I say? The world seems small to me. I disappear, and God alone remains . . . God, little sister. Do you know who He is? Do you know what He is?

Blessed be He who permits that we creatures lack the words to speak of God and His love, because if we had the words, no matter how lofty they might be, they would shed no light at all. I have nothing to say. Take my meaning . . . I cannot explain anything to you. Who am I, a poor human being, to even try?

I've spoken of God in all my letters to you . . . but I still haven't told you a *thing*, don't you see? You don't need me to try anymore, do you? . . . I've done what I can, and now that I am going to fall silent, I can see that I have done nothing at all . . . I've fumbled for feeble words, made myself *nervous* from time to time, and nothing . . . Well, what I mean is, perhaps what I *have not been able to say* managed to bring you closer to God than all my idle words, which were a creature's words and thus imperfect. But it doesn't matter.

Now, in the silence of my Trapa, you'll understand me better. I won't be able to say anything to you, but whenever you think of me, know that this is always what I'd say to you: "Rise, sister, have no fear . . . love God . . . fly toward Him, rest in Him . . . don't look down, don't look at yourself . . . love God with abandon, for He is already near . . . so little time remains. Let's not waste time on commentary or explanations, leave behind even the writings of the saints . . . they have *nothing* to say . . . *nothing* . . . Forget everything but God . . . God. Oh, little sister! Do you know who He is? . . .

Never mind suffering, never mind rejoicing, what's it to you? . . . God alone suffices.<sup>724</sup> He fills all things, He has to bury us in His love . . .

Lord, Lord, how is it even possible to have a conversation? What could we human beings have to say?

We must be silent, little sister, not because our words might taint what *cannot* be tainted, but rather because unless we are silent, we cannot . . . we do not receive Him, either in our miserable bodies or souls. What more reason do we need? That's why you can't imagine how *thrilled* I am to have to fall silent . . . Only you know, and even if the whole world knew, who cares? . . . I don't.

Rest assured that with whatever strength I have, be it great or little, from the *silence* of my Trapa I am shouting out to you, "Sister, love God! . . . Let yourself be loved and do nothing more! . . . Oh soul of God who is longing to give yourself over to Him . . . what are you waiting for? Why are you suffering? . . . Why are you crying? . . . Why are you laughing? Don't let any of that rattle you or bother you. Immerse yourself in that Love . . . rise up and fly toward Him, and if you fall . . . what does it matter? You're the one who is falling, and you are nothing. Get back up again, and get back to flying . . . with God you can do anything, all is forgotten . . . There are no words, little sister. There

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<sup>724</sup> From a poem by Saint Teresa of Ávila: "Let nothing trouble you, / Let nothing scare you, / All is fleeting, / God alone is unchanging. / Patience / Everything obtains. / Who possesses God / Nothing wants. / God alone suffices" ("Efficacy of Patience," in *Collected Works*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodríguez [Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1976], 3:386).

are no words. There is only one, which is love. And when that love refers to God . . . silence is best. Am I making sense? I have so much going on inside.

I don't know when I'll finish this letter. I wanted it to be my last one, and to include when I'll be coming to Ávila . . . I'll wait, and so will you.

I'll leave it there for now. I'm off to bed. Tomorrow, which is Epiphany, I'll go adore the Child Jesus, and I'll offer Him . . . what I always do . . . Until tomorrow, my dear little sister in Jesus and Mary.

January 6

My dear little sister,

We just saw Fernando off. Poor kid . . . he's going so far away . . . I'm a bit restless today, I'm waiting on a letter from Venta de Baños and I don't know if it'll get here . . . Of course, I am expecting your letter. I don't know what to say . . . I'm very boring. There are days when I feel so worn out . . . I don't know why.

My mother is very sad . . .

Lord, Lord, Your will be done . . . Forgive me, I've only just started and I'm already going to leave you again . . . I'll keep going later.

January 7

Yesterday, my dear sister, I had a very bad day. I spent the whole afternoon with horrible mouth pain . . . I was hardly myself . . . I'm doing better today.

I still can't tell you when exactly I'm coming, because I haven't gotten a letter from La Trapa yet . . . I was expecting it again today, but it didn't arrive. Instead, I got

one from you . . . Look, I don't want to make any comments. I'll just say that I very much liked what you said about the Virgin Mary . . . How great the Lord is . . .

Since I don't want this letter to go on any further, I'm going to send it to you today. As soon as I learn the date of my departure, I'll send you a telegram to let you know as soon as I can, just as Uncle Polín asked.

I have nothing more to say . . . With all my great affection, your brother in Jesus and Mary,

*Rafael*

**99. to Fr. José Olmedo**

Oviedo, January 7, 1936

My dear Father Master,

Just a quick note to let you know that once I have resolved all my concerns in Oviedo, I await only a letter from you with the instructions I requested before setting off for my Trapa.

Since I fear that my letter most likely has not reached you, I will take the liberty of reminding you that all I wanted to know was what clothes I should bring, and whether I could bring books, and which books Br. Ramón asked for so that I can bring them for him.

I'll be coming by car with my father and brother.<sup>725</sup> I'll stop by Ávila beforehand to say goodbye to my aunt and uncle . . . I can't wait until I'm back in my monastery again for good.

There are so many things I'd like to tell you . . . but why bother? I'll tell you everything when I'm there.

Please pray often to the Virgin for me, and give my regards to Father Abbot.

Counting on your blessing, your future novice,

*Brother María Rafael, O.C.S.O.*

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<sup>725</sup> That is, Rafael's brother Leopoldo (see Letter 113).

**100. Dedication of a holy card to Mercedes Barón Torres**

Oviedo, January 9, 1936

J-H-S

My dearest mother,

I am going to La Trapa . . . but I go very happily, because I go “seeking my Love,” as the poem by Saint John of the Cross says.<sup>726</sup>

What more can I say?

I long to remain somewhat hidden from men . . . but for you, I’ll always be your beloved son who, at the Virgin Mary’s feet, hopes to follow the path described in that poem by Saint John of the Cross. No gathering flowers, and no fearing wild beasts.

May Mary enlighten us, and may Jesus grant us the grace to bring our journey to a happy end. That is my prayer for both of us. Your son, the Trappist,

*Brother María Rafael, O.C.R.*

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<sup>726</sup> “Seeking my Love / I will head for the mountains and for watersides / I will not gather flowers, / nor fear wild beasts; / I will go beyond strong men and frontiers” (John of the Cross, *Collected Works*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez [Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1991], 471).

**101. Dedication of a holy card to Leopoldo Barón Torres<sup>727</sup>**

Ávila, January 10, 1936

J-H-S

I wanted to leave so many things for you here . . . but why bother? . . . I've renounced everything I have . . . as you well know, and it's all gone up to God.

Turn to Him, and in Him you'll find me . . . I have nothing else to offer you, for of what use to you is my human affection?

Today, on this red-letter day, I have nothing to say to you, and nothing to leave here for you. Our Lady will do it on my behalf, as only She knows how.

God alone!

*Brother María Rafael*

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<sup>727</sup> During his visit to Ávila on his way back to La Trapa, Rafael wrote this dedication to his uncle on the back of the holy card he'd painted for him, "Knowing How to Wait" (OC 588; see Letter 87 and Figure 5).

## VI. A Trappist Oblate

### *Writings from Rafael's oblature, January–August 1936*

On January 11, 1936, Rafael re-entered the monastery as an oblate. Due to his medical condition and canonical status, Rafael lived in the community infirmary rather than the novitiate, and observed only a limited version of the community's work and prayer schedules. While no longer preparing for formal vows, he still followed the practice of obedience, including the need to request a superior's permission and paper for letter-writing. As such, in many ways, Rafael's letters during this period are much like they were during his novitiate: few and far between, always addressed to family, and never during Lent.

Writing to his father, Rafael notes that he had been asked by his superiors to begin studying for ordination as a priest,<sup>728</sup> as well as contribute his drawing and painting skills to various artistic projects around the monastery.<sup>729</sup> He also sought to calm his father's fears about the political situation in Spain, after the left-wing coalition (*Frente Popular*, or Popular Front) won a majority of the seats in the legislature in the election of February 16, 1936.<sup>730</sup> The coalition included many politicians who espoused anticlerical policies

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<sup>728</sup> Letter 103.

<sup>729</sup> Letter 102.

<sup>730</sup> Paul Preston, *The Spanish Civil War: Reaction, Revolution, and Revenge*, Revised and Expanded Edition (New York: W.W. Norton, 2007), 82.



and, in some cases, anticlerical violence,<sup>731</sup> leading Rafael's father to offer the monks of La Trapa his own home as a place of refuge. Rafael was insistent that his father keep his eyes on eternity: "Revolutions can't touch us Trappists . . . Our treasure is God, our life is God, and fortunately, they can't take God away from us, whether through laws or at the price of our blood . . ." <sup>732</sup>

Even so, the community at La Trapa was paying close attention to the political situation as Spanish Civil War approached in the summer of 1936. Since the monks specifically were facing anticlerical violence, the community's superiors relaxed the usual prohibition on news from the outside world, allowing the newspaper to be read at mealtimes. However, since Rafael was an oblate bound to the infirmary, he took his meals alone and was not privy to such information. "Here, we're just doing what we

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<sup>731</sup> As with the Revolution of 1934, Rafael's family's fear was less of state-sponsored persecution per se and more of the extrajudicial killings that accompany the widespread anarchy they associated with the Left. Anticlerical violence had a symbolic function in the ongoing political struggle: "Priests and monks were killed because they were seen as representing an oppressive Church historically associated with the rich and powerful whose ecclesiastical hierarchy had backed the military rebellion [. . .] The act of desecration itself—churches destroyed or turned to profane uses; the remains of religious personnel disinterred—speaks eloquently of the power still invested in religion and the Church by the desecrators themselves" (Helen Graham, *The Spanish Civil War: A Very Short Introduction* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2005], 27).

<sup>732</sup> Letter 104.

always do,” he wrote to his aunt, “praying for Spain, but knowing nothing about it. If something happens, our superiors will tell us.”<sup>733</sup> Instead, Rafael pieced together the dawn of war from the changes to the community’s daily life as they started extinguishing candles at night, praying away from the windows, and quartering soldiers. The monastery continued to observe its silence, but gunshots kept them regularly informed.

Meanwhile, Rafael focused his efforts on a writing project, an illustrated notebook he gave the title *Meditations of a Trappist*. Divided into 23 meditations and 12 illustrations, opening with an illustrated cover and an epigraph from Saint Teresa of Ávila,<sup>734</sup> the *Meditations* mark a shift in genre within Rafael’s work. His unusual use of third-person perspective throughout the *Meditations* creates a literary work that is anonymized in the tradition of monastic writings intended for an external readership.<sup>735</sup> While he speaks of himself in first person in his letters and other writings, here he reflects on his own spiritual journey in the third person, referring to himself only as “a Trappist.” Finally, bibliographical evidence suggests that Rafael copied the *Meditations* into this

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<sup>733</sup> Letter 105.

<sup>734</sup> Juan Antonio Martínez Camino, *Mi Rafael* (Bilbao: Desclée de Brouwer, 2003), 242.

<sup>735</sup> In Letter 81, Rafael proposed just such an anonymous project to his aunt: “I did have this thought: when I’m in La Trapa, I’ll suggest this to Father Abbot, and surely he’ll permit me to write. At La Trapa, at Mary’s feet, taking my time, I’ll write to the Virgin about everything that occurs to me that would be worth reading . . . I’ll send you the drafts, and if you think it’s good, it can be published under the name ‘a Cistercian, a son of Mary,’ that’s all.”

notebook after drafting them elsewhere, indicating an editorial process not present in his often messily composed letters.<sup>736</sup>

Together, these stylistic choices demonstrate that Rafael conceived of the *Meditations* as a cohesive literary and artistic composition rather than strictly a diary or spiritual journal. As such, they invite a meditative reading process, using each short text and image as food for study and contemplation. Nevertheless, with a self-deprecating humor that echoes Saint Teresa's own rhetorically exaggerated humility,<sup>737</sup> Rafael framed the project as a mere outlet for his silenced chattiness:

With the help of the Virgin Mary, to whom I dedicate these ramblings, meditations, monologues, impressions, etc., since you could really call them anything, I begin this notebook, in which I hope to expel something of the excessive verbiage that the Lord has given me.<sup>738</sup>

While the *Meditations* contain beautiful spiritual reflections on death and eternity, the deepening of Rafael's vocation, and finding happiness in God alone,<sup>739</sup> they also function as a diary providing a strange window into the beginnings of the Spanish Civil War. The war officially began July 17, 1936, with a military uprising led by General Francisco Franco against the government of the Second Spanish Republic. Broadly

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<sup>736</sup> Juan Antonio Martínez Camino, *Mi Rafael* (Bilbao: Desclée de Brouwer, 2003), 242.

<sup>737</sup> On the subject of Saint Teresa's own rhetoric, see Alison Weber, *Teresa of Ávila and the Rhetoric of Femininity* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1996).

<sup>738</sup> *Meditations* 108.

<sup>739</sup> *Meditations* 109, 110, and 117, respectively.

speaking, the war was a conflict between the right-wing Nationalists and the left-wing Republicans; on a practical level, each side consisted of a complex ideological alliance that varied by region.<sup>740</sup> In Rafael's case, both he and his family were entirely concerned with the fate of the Church, especially after having witnessed the anticlerical violence in Oviedo during the Revolution of 1934.<sup>741</sup> They all supported the Nationalist coup, believing it to be the only alternative to a violently anticlerical and totalitarian future—especially once Rafael's monastery was threatened repeatedly by local revolutionaries allied with the Republicans.<sup>742</sup> Even so, Rafael retained a certain distance from the ideological passions of the day, worrying about what would follow in their wake: “if

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<sup>740</sup> For an overview of the conflict's origins, politics, and course, see Paul Preston, *The Spanish Civil War: Reaction, Revolution, and Revenge*, Revised and Expanded Edition (New York: W. W. Norton, 2007) or Helen Graham, *The Spanish Civil War: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005). Franco declared victory for the Nationalists on April 1, 1939 and ruled as dictator of Spain until his death in 1975.

<sup>741</sup> See introduction to Section 5: A New Call.

<sup>742</sup> According to Rafael's confessor, Fr. Teófilo Sandoval, “On July 19, [1934,] two large vans of Republican fighters armed with pistols, carbines, and rifles surrounded the monastery, threatening the monks. A small group of soldiers came from Palencia to drive them away . . . [The Republicans] had planned to strip the monks naked and burn them alive in the Dueñas town square, along with the local Teresian Sisters and parish priest, Don Fulgencio, whom they had captured a few days prior” (testimony quoted in OC 637).

victory does not make us better people . . . then it would be preferable not to be victorious.”<sup>743</sup>

Rafael concluded the *Meditations* on August 8, 1936. Shortly thereafter, on September 29, Rafael was conscripted into the army, along with the other oblates, novices, and monks of military age.<sup>744</sup> Forced to leave the monastery for a second time, Rafael reported for military service eagerly, believing God was unexpectedly calling him to a more literal martyrdom—but ultimately, he was rejected from the army due to his medical condition. He returned to La Trapa on December 6, 1936, utterly humiliated to have been found “useless.”<sup>745</sup>

Rafael’s conscription marked the true beginning of his wartime writings, which will be explored in the full-length book version of this project. The crisis of faith, masculinity, and identity that he experienced upon being found medically unfit to serve

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<sup>743</sup> Letter 123.

<sup>744</sup> “Conscription had been introduced [. . .], giving the Nationalists an advantage of something in the region of two hundred thousand troops over the Republicans. [. . .] By December 1937, Franco had called up eleven years’ worth of conscripts, those from 1929 to 1939, consisting of 413,500 men” (Preston, *The Spanish Civil War*, 273). Rafael had completed his obligatory military service in 1933, placing him squarely within the range of young men eligible for conscription.

<sup>745</sup> In a letter to his mother, shortly after his rejection from the army, Rafael wrote, “my uselessness keeps me from taking up arms to serve my country” (Letter 134, October 18, 1936).

and returning to a monastery totally emptied of all its other young men caused a radical shift in Rafael's understanding of his vocation. In his wartime writings, he traces a spiritual journey in which his double isolation from the world and from the wider monastic community is transformed from loneliness into intimacy, from simple aloneness to being alone with God.<sup>746</sup>

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<sup>746</sup> After his return to the monastery, Rafael reflected, "Showing me the 7 great void that is nothingness, which is everything outside of Him, [God] invites me to reflect and obliges me, in my uselessness, to seek His aid. He separates me from everything else in order to unite me more closely to Himself" (*My Notebook* 150).

**102. to Rafael Arnáiz Sánchez de la Campa**

La Trapa, January 14, 1936

J-H-S Ave Maria

My dearest father,

Reverend Father Abbot gave me permission to write you because I need my things for drawing. I'm very happy and doing very well . . . For now they don't let me participate completely in all the community activities; Reverend Father wants me to take it slowly. I eat and sleep in the infirmary, and during work hours, I help the infirmarian. There are so many things I would tell you, but that's not the purpose of this letter . . . I'll tell you everything later.

Did you arrive safely in Oviedo? How are Mamá and Merceditas? Of course, I don't know if you are in Oviedo or Burgos . . .

Well, the situation is that Reverend Father has asked me to take on a line drawing, so if you don't mind, I need you to send me a few things I have back home. Here's the list:

By registered mail, and tied simply with a string, a finished wood panel, which I believe is on top of the white armoire.

A long straightedge.

A 50-centimeter or 40-centimeter ruler.

A triangular scale ruler, in its cardboard case (green).

A set square.

A ruling pen and a compass.

Two no. 2 pencils, Harmaout brand, or however you spell it.<sup>747</sup>

Two no. 1 pencils: “ “ “ “

A box of thumbtacks and three or four nib pens with their penholder.

Whatever watercolor brushes you can find, and the watercolor palette, and the white porcelain jars, however many there are.

A bottle of India ink, and an inkstick of it as well.

Whatman paper, fine-grained, three sheets or so.

Canson paper, a bit of that . . . well, just take however much of it you think is appropriate from the office, and leave it at that.

I'm so sorry to have to bother you with such a nuisance . . . but there's nothing to be done about that. If I'd known, I'd have brought all that instead of the oil paints.

But look, the rulers, the wood panel, and paper can all be sent registered together, and everything else can just go in a shoebox stuffed with newspaper.

Right now it's six-thirty in the evening, but since they don't let me get up until three-thirty, I'm not sleepy at all.

They gave me a novice's habit, the same one I had before . . . I'm very happy. I'm confident that just by being obedient, I can be completely happy, and with Mary's help, become holy. What more could I ask for?

I'm sure you're all calm and content by now . . . From here, I ask the Lord to make it so.

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<sup>747</sup> Koh-i-Noor Hardtmuth is a Czech brand of writing implements and other art materials.



Well, my dearest father, I'll leave it there for now. I'll write you at greater length another time.

If you're still with my mother . . . what do you want me to say? . . . And if you're just with Leopoldo . . . well, nothing to say to him either. This poor Trappist has so much to send you that it is all reduced to nothing.

Your son, who loves you very much,

*Brother María Rafael, O.C.S.O.*

**103. to Rafael Arnáiz Sánchez de la Campa**

La Trapa, February 9, 1936

J-H-S Ave Maria

My dearest father,

I'm sure you've been waiting for a letter from me for a while now . . . But look, obedience is what it is, and that is what rules my actions. I'm writing you today because Reverend Father ordered me to tell you, or rather to inform you, about the state of my health, which thanks be to God is very good . . . I am very happy in my cloak and scapular.

When I had just arrived at the monastery, my blood sugar levels were somewhat elevated, thanks to the days that the Lord had just kindly allowed to pass, if you know what I mean . . . Now my levels are much lower, and on one occasion they even went down to zero . . . I can tell you that I honestly don't concern *myself* with my illness at all. In his charity, Brother Tescelino, the infirmarian, makes up for that . . . He gives me insulin, takes care of me, checks my levels every eight days, weighs me, etc . . . I've gained weight, by the way.

Anyway, I won't say any more about my health, which is the least of my concerns.

Now, time for a bit of news: I start studying Latin tomorrow . . . Up until now, my only work tool has been the broom, because they haven't let me use the hoe . . . but Father Master told me that tomorrow I can go out into the fields with the novices for work time in the afternoon, and I'll do my studies in the morning. They still won't let me

get up at two o'clock either, but rather at three-thirty. I will never be able to thank God, first of all, and then my superiors, enough for the charity with which I am being treated . . . . Honestly, it often makes me feel embarrassed . . . . In truth, I don't even deserve . . . . Anyway, pay me no mind.

I received all the supplies you sent me.<sup>748</sup> Happily, I finished what Reverend Father had asked me to do, which was a landscape of the monastery for some postcards . . . . I also painted Saint Bernard, but I ended up giving him a bit of a smirk . . . . I don't like it.<sup>749</sup>

Anyway, my dearest father, I don't have anything in particular to tell you . . . . My life carries on with total tranquility in prayer, at work, and in silence. Now study will intervene, too . . . . Everything for God, and with His help . . . . what more could I require to be happy? I assure you that I am indeed happy . . . . not in the way that the world understands happiness, because for the religious, happiness is found in the cross, for which the world has no love. But look, that's what we're for, right?

Now Spain has asked for our prayers, sacrifices, and penances; we offer them all with pleasure . . . . It's not all about political campaigning.<sup>750</sup> Everyone must do what they can . . . . and what a Trappist can do is remain in the presence of God, whether to deter His wrath or beg His mercy . . . . What a beautiful purpose we have, isn't it? Nobody knows what that means.

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<sup>748</sup> See Letter 102, in which Rafael requested various art supplies.

<sup>749</sup> See Figures 6 and 7 at the end of this letter.

<sup>750</sup> The Spanish government held a general election on February 16 and 23, 1936.

Don't think that I've forgotten about you. I think of you all very often. I am determined to help my parents and brothers and sister to . . . well, you can guess . . . Sometimes my prayers go to Oviedo, other times they head for Burgos, and still others for Belgium<sup>751</sup> . . . It's as I said before, all must do what they can, and I can do nothing else.

Look, since it may bring you comfort, I'll tell you that I think of you every day, especially when I pass by the image of Our Lady of Carmel, to whom I know *abuela* Luisa<sup>752</sup> was very devoted, as are you. So anyway, every day, even if it's just a Hail Mary, know that you will be remembered before Our Lady of Carmel as long as I live. I ask Her to enlighten you, to give you faith, to make you holy in the midst of the world, and to help you bear whatever sorrows you might have.

If only you knew, my dear father. All this is so brief, and it's going by so quickly . . . If only I could make everyone see that *there is need of only one thing*,<sup>753</sup> and that everything else . . . Well, what can I say that you don't already know? . . . Your Trappist son has nothing to say to you. He will surely not make his vows in the eyes of men, but with each passing day, he grows more Trappist in the eyes of God. What does it matter? It's a question of knowing how to make use of this life, in one way or another. But

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<sup>751</sup> Rafael's father and brother Leopoldo were at home in Oviedo, while his mother Mercedes and sister Mercedesitas were visiting Burgos. His brother Luis Fernando was studying in Belgium.

<sup>752</sup> Luisa Sánchez de la Campa, Rafael's paternal grandmother.

<sup>753</sup> Luke 10:42.

always with love for God, and seeing ourselves for what we are: pilgrims on this earth.

*Our citizenship is in heaven*<sup>754</sup> . . . Everything else is fleeting. Isn't that so?

Well, I don't want to preach, I'm not ordained yet.

I'm telling you, at 24 years old, Latin's going to be much harder than scrubbing and sweeping. Nothing to be done about that. In chapter today, Reverend Father spoke to us about obedience, and it is clear that he who obeys his superior does the will of God.

Well . . . I haven't heard a thing about my mother and sister . . . I suppose they're in Burgos, doing well and being happy. Since I'm not going to write two letters, send this one to my dearest mother. It's for both of you.

Now I'm going to ask you for a favor . . . Reverend Father Abbot didn't want me to, but I insisted, and he gave me permission to ask you this. He says he doesn't want to take advantage of you, and his civility forbade it, but I'm your son and I don't see anything bad about asking.

It's about Brother Tescelino, the infirmarian I mentioned earlier. The lymph nodes in his neck are swollen, and they've recommended ultraviolet or quartz light, or whatever it's called. They're finding it impossible to get it for him, so I mentioned that you could lend us the lamp we have at home for as long as necessary. You'd be doing a work of mercy, because with the cold these days, Brother is getting worse and he really needs it. If you come, please bring it, if you haven't sold it already, and when his sessions are finished, you can come get it again, simple as that. Don't you think I did the right thing in asking you? When a friar or monk needs something, first he asks God, and then

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<sup>754</sup> Philippians 3:20.

he asks human beings . . . Hence “the lips of a friar,” as they say<sup>755</sup> . . . But I’m not just some friar to you, right? I’m your son.

Anyway, I also told Reverend Father that you’d certainly come for Holy Week. He told me that even though you’d wanted to come during Lent, and even though we aren’t receiving visitors, since it’s you, you would be able to see me<sup>756</sup>. . . . Yet another favor to be thankful for, right? As you can see, the doors of this monastery will always be open to you . . . and I’m very glad about that . . . At first, you don’t want to see anyone . . . you’re looking for peace, and we can be a bit selfish. That is, listen, you always have to be careful at first, because our nature is weak, and exposing it can lead to trouble. But as time goes by, you come to understand that with God’s help you can do all things. As for myself, I can tell you that if I could bring some glory to God in this way, even if I had to visit with people every single day . . . You can come whenever you like.

Today a priest came by whom I met in Toro, a former Jesuit, Fr. Joaquín Redín . . . I assisted him at Holy Mass, and then I spent a few minutes with him at the guesthouse . . . So I lost about half an hour of my day, and I had to pause writing this letter, even though I honestly don’t have anything else to tell you. But you know me, when I start writing, I don’t know when to stop.

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<sup>755</sup> In Spanish, the phrase “he’s got the lips of a friar” (“*le ha hecho la boca un fraile*”) refers to someone who is constantly begging for things.

<sup>756</sup> Rafael’s father stayed at La Trapa from April 9–11, 1936 (Holy Thursday through Holy Saturday). Rafael’s mother joined him there on April 11 (Holy Saturday). See OC 600.

If you write me, please do so before Holy Lent, because Reverend Father hasn't told me if he'd give me any letters then.

Have you heard from Fernando? I can assure you that while nothing in the world holds any interest for me, my family certainly does. I came here with the ambition of becoming a saint (woe is me) . . . but I want to be a very human saint (not that I think there are saints who aren't). Just a few words are enough for a good listener, even if those words are a rushed mess. It doesn't matter.

It's true, my dearest father, love for God does not exclude love for creatures. It's a matter of purifying that love and making it holy, and believe me, now I love you all more and better than I did before. I don't know if I'm making sense.

Anyway, I'm going to ask Father Master for more paper because I'm running out. He gave me two more sheets, but I don't know if I'll have enough time to fill them. . . fill them up with words upon words . . . I don't know what I'm saying. I'm doing what I always do, just writing whatever comes to mind in the moment, whether or not it flows from what came before. If I can't be familiar with my parents, who can I be familiar with? I have more free time today, since it's Sunday, and I'm using it to write you.

In a little bit, we'll go down to choir for None, the hour at which our Lord died. Afterwards, all the lay brothers have catechism. By the way, after catechism class the

other day (Saint Alberic's feast day),<sup>757</sup> a very holy novice<sup>758</sup> sang to us, both because of obedience and in honor of our patron (Saint Alberic is the patron of lay brothers). Guess what he was singing? That's right, *fandanguillos*.<sup>759</sup>

And he did a very good job indeed. First he looked at the Virgin, and then at Father Master, and he cleared his throat, and with mournful sighs, he burst into song. We had such a good time with that novice . . . If only you knew, he's such a kind soul.

In fact, sometimes I feel like singing "María de la O,"<sup>760</sup> but since we're never alone here, I haven't been able to. Besides, it wouldn't be very edifying for us to sing. Anyway, perhaps these are all weaknesses of ours, but I assure you that the Virgin loves us Trappists very much, weaknesses and all.

How's the Fiat? And what about the Chevrolet, did you sell it already? As you can see, I keep an eye on everything.

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<sup>757</sup> At the time, Saint Alberic of Cîteaux, one of the founders of the Cistercian Order, was celebrated on January 26. Now, all three Cistercian founders are celebrated on that day: Saints Robert of Molesme, Alberic of Cîteaux, and Stephen Harding.

<sup>758</sup> Brother Doroteo Martín Renedo (1907–1985); see OC 602.

<sup>759</sup> A *fandango* is a type of Spanish folk song, in addition to a type of dance. A *fandanguillo* or "little fandango" is a subgenre generally distinguished by its 3/8 time signature.

<sup>760</sup> A flamenco song first recorded by Estrellita Castro in 1935. The title comes from the chorus: "María de la O / what an unhappy gypsy girl you are / even though you've got it all" (OC 602).



We've just finished our catechism class. Now we have an interval,<sup>761</sup> and then Vespers. Then another interval, and then prayer in community for fifteen minutes. Then dinner, and after dinner, another interval which I use for the following: I clear the refectory plates out of the infirmary, sweep up the crumbs, and close the windows. Then I get the lamp ready for the Blessed Sacrament, which we bring up to the infirmary chapel every day to prevent sacrilege, as has been happening nearby.<sup>762</sup> Then I make a short visit to the Virgin, and then it's off to chapter for the recitation of Compline. Then choir; the *Salve*; Father Abbot's blessing; and then, in the peace and grace of God, to bed.

Nearly a month has gone by since I've arrived, and I've hardly noticed. You don't notice time passing here; everything seems so quick.

Tell the Vallaures that Ramón is doing very well and he's very happy . . . and nothing else in particular.<sup>763</sup> Tell me if you know anything about Uncle Polín's situation.

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<sup>761</sup> *Intervals*: In the monastic schedule, any time not officially assigned to work or prayer is referred to as an "interval." Monks and nuns may use this "free time" as they see fit.

<sup>762</sup> In December 1935, Bishop (now Saint) Manuel González García of Palencia ordered the diocese's parishes and monasteries to remove the Blessed Sacrament from their chapels at night for safekeeping in living quarters. This order was in response to a spate of sacrileges committed at night in the area, including desecration of the Eucharist during thefts (OC 603).

<sup>763</sup> Br. Ramón Vallaures was a novice at La Trapa (see Letter 64), and his brother Juan was Rafael's close friend (see Letter 9).

Anyway, my dearest father, I want to put my whole soul into this letter, I want to share everything I am feeling with you . . . What can I tell you about my life that you don't already know? On the outside, my life is the Rule, followed more or less perfectly as a sick person; and on the inside, my life is God . . . and I wish it were just Him alone, but sometimes creatures sneak in there too . . . nothing to be done about that . . . Or rather, let us praise God for all of it.

He loves us like this . . . weak, wretched, and sometimes very sinful . . . What can be expected of us feeble creatures? . . . I assure you that I will fall into temptations, I will not achieve my goals, and I will not reciprocate God's goodness toward me . . . but nothing should discourage us . . . On the contrary, the more we come to know what we are, the less we will expect of ourselves, the more we will despise ourselves, and the more we will turn to God . . . With Him we can do all things. Isn't that so?

Anyway, don't listen to me. Pay attention only to my letter's intention, and disregard its words, which are always a bit clumsy, and mine all the more so.

How is Merceditas doing? I imagine she's very happy in Burgos with Uncle Álvaro,<sup>764</sup> who I'm sure is as loving toward her as he always is . . . Tell her that if she's not grumpy anymore, and if they let me, one of these days I'll write her a letter or homily or spiritual talk with jokes and stories. There's a little bit of everything in my writings . . . Blessed be God, a leopard can't change its spots . . . Anyway, my superiors know me by

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<sup>764</sup> Rafael's maternal uncle Álvaro Barón Torres and his wife Pepita Conde Merino lived in Burgos.

now, and since they have to read these letters, they might as well realize what I am. I'm not embarrassed.

I'll change and improve. The Lord and the Virgin will make it happen. In the meantime, be satisfied with what I am and what I'm like.

Now I'm going to make my visit to the Lord, and then go to Vespers, and then I'll finish up here.

Now we've just come back to the novitiate, after having received Benediction with the Most Blessed Sacrament and prayed Vespers. It's a quarter to four, and it's almost dark here . . . These past few days, or rather this whole month, it hasn't stopped raining, and it even rained a little today.

Well, my dearest father, I hardly have anything else to tell you. Pray for me sometime. Pray for my perseverance, and above all, pray that I might be able to reciprocate the enormous graces God gives me. The great responsibility I have in God's eyes scares me a little sometimes. I am accountable to Him for so many things.

Just like the first time I came here, I imagine you're hearing all sorts of ridiculous things about me . . . Pay them no mind. The world's mottos and maxims are incompatible with the spirit of God. Where people see madness, stupidity, and folly, perhaps Jesus does not . . . and He is the one to whom we must give an account. So then, let us focus on that and that alone. Thank the Lord endlessly that you have a son in La Trapa, in the "school for the Lord's service," as our father Saint Benedict says.<sup>765</sup> What more could you want for me?

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<sup>765</sup> "Therefore we intend to establish a school for the Lord's service" (RB 18).

I don't want to get tiresome, so I'll leave it there for now, until next time. You can't complain that I write you short letters. But I know you like it when I write, and it feels like rather too little, since I have to pay you back somehow for all I owe you . . . which is everything.

Anyway, forgive your son for . . . I don't know, whatever needs forgiving, there's always something. Give Leopoldo a big hug for me, and send one Fernandillo's way too.<sup>766</sup> Send this letter to my mother. As for you, all my love, your Trappist son,

*Brother María Rafael, O.C.S.O.*

P.S. My dearest mother,

Everything I said to my father was also for you, so I don't have anything else to say. If you're in Burgos, give my aunt and uncle a hug for me. I'm praying to the Most Blessed Virgin for you all very much; do the same for me.

Does Mercedes have a dog now? If you come to Venta de Baños don't leave it behind, of course . . . And if it's big, that's even better.

Well, I think we've all gone mad . . . I keep thinking of silly things to say. In truth, I'm a very unserious Trappist, especially when it comes to my little sister Mercedes . . . but you'll see, I'm going to come up with a rather beautiful sermon to preach at her when she comes here . . . it'll start with Latin and everything, and end by wishing her eternal glory . . . But of course, when you're dealing with a girl who loves mutts so much

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<sup>766</sup> Rafael's brother Leopoldo was at home in Oviedo with their father, while his brother Fernando ("Fernandillo") was away at school in Leuven, Belgium.

. . . what can you expect? Nothing, absolutely nothing. Her stern, terrible Trappist brother might as well go about correcting her . . .

My dear sister, I can hear you saying it now, “Well, I never! Who does that boy think he is? . . . That’s the last thing I needed, you coming around here to chat . . . I’m going to go buy a dozen dogs right now.” Well, Mercedes . . . no matter what I say, you’ll do the opposite, just to be contrary . . .

Anyway, pay me no mind. Be good. Don’t make your mother angry. Offer a prayer to the Virgin sometime for your brother . . . Are you still making your meditation?

With hugs for both of you,

*Br. M. Rafael*

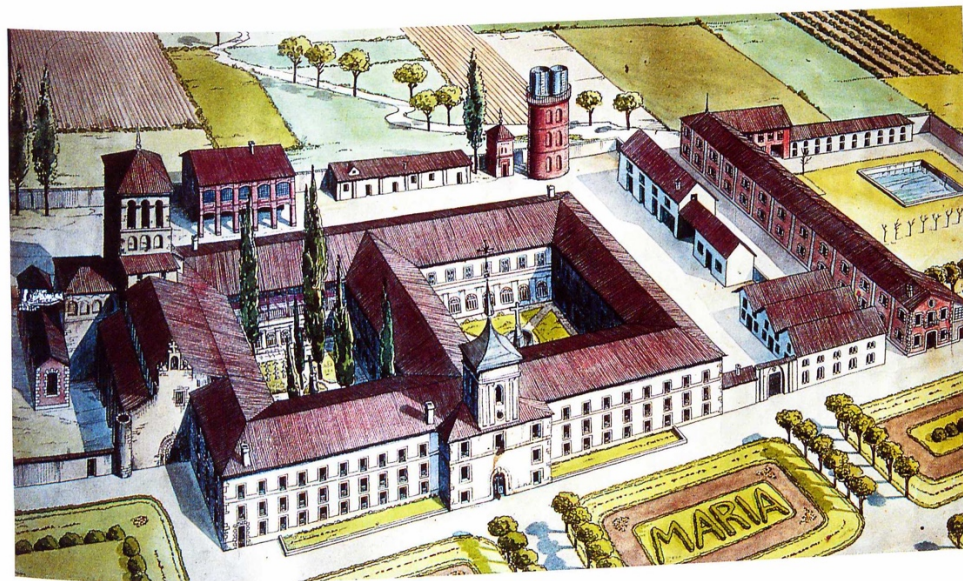


Fig. 7<sup>67</sup>: Cistercian Monastery of San Isidro de Dueñas

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<sup>767</sup> Image source: Antonio Cobos Soto, *La “pintura mensaje” del hermano Rafael*

(Burgos: Monte Carmelo y Monasterio Cisterciense de San Isidro de Dueñas, 1989), 199.





Fig. 8<sup>768</sup>: Saint Bernard of Clairvaux

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<sup>768</sup> Image source: Antonio Cobos Soto, *La "pintura mensaje" del hermano Rafael*

(Burgos: Monte Carmelo y Monasterio Cisterciense de San Isidro de Dueñas, 1989), page 197.

**104. to Rafael Arnáiz Sánchez de la Campa**

La Trapa, February 18, 1936

J-H-S Ave Maria

My dearest father,

Father Master gave me your letter today. I understand your unease, but I don't think it's quite that bad.<sup>769</sup> Of course, Reverend Father Abbot gave me permission to write you a quick note, due to the *exceptional circumstances* we're living through.

What can I say? . . . Nothing. Don't worry, and to tell you the truth, I don't know anything about what's going on . . . That's what my superiors are for, and rumors are all that reach us in community . . . but from what Reverend Father told me, I don't think there's any reason to fear for now.

I don't know, you're in the world, you know better than I do. But don't worry about me. Revolutions can't touch us Trappists . . . Our treasure is God, our life is God, and fortunately, they can't take God away from us, whether through laws or at the price of our blood . . .

Be calm. Why worry? Everything is a great mercy from God, and humanity cannot go further than He permits them to . . . I promise you that we are all calm. We are

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<sup>769</sup> In the Spanish general elections of February 16, 1936, the left-wing coalition (*Frente Popular*, or Popular Front) won a majority of the seats in the legislature. The coalition included many politicians who espoused anticlerical policies and, in some cases, anticlerical violence.

still singing to the Lord in choir as always, and, as always, praying only that His will be done.

Reverend Father Abbot told me to thank you for your offer,<sup>770</sup> which he doesn't think he'll need to take you up on . . . If laws persecute us for being disciples of Christ, they'll persecute us just as much there as they will here, and wherever we go; for we will always follow the divine Master, and the more persecuted we are, the better.

Anyway, I don't have anything else to say . . . Turn your gaze to heaven, and you'll see, *everything* is merely God's mercy. I suppose you'll get a letter from Father Abbot letting you know we received the lamp.

I don't write unless they tell me to . . . I have to submit to the Rule, and as you know, when you enter religious life, things aren't the same as they are in the world. So don't worry about your son, who may naturally be sad about the situation in Spain, but on a personal level . . . he is so calm . . . God alone suffices<sup>771</sup> . . . besides, you'll see, the Virgin will help us all.

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<sup>770</sup> Rafael's father had offered the monks refuge in his home, should they have needed to flee the monastery due to anticlerical violence.

<sup>771</sup> From a poem by Saint Teresa of Ávila: "Let nothing trouble you, / Let nothing scare you, / All is fleeting, / God alone is unchanging. / Patience / Everything obtains. / Who possesses God / Nothing wants. / God alone suffices" ("Efficacy of Patience," in *Collected Works*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodríguez [Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1976], 3:386).



If we're going to fear something, let's fear God's judgment, because that of human beings is of no importance.

Farewell, with a great big hug for you and the same to my mother, brother, and sister, from your son,

*Brother María Rafael, O.C.S.O.*

**105. to María Osorio**

La Trapa, February 23, 1936

Ave Maria

My dearest sister in the Lord,

The other day, Father Master gave me a letter from you so that I might answer it. Today I'm doing that, although I don't know where to begin.

First of all, I should tell you that my superiors gave me permission to answer you *this one time*<sup>772</sup> . . . I am a child of obedience now, and neither my actions nor my will are at my own disposal any longer . . . That's the first thing the Lord asks of those who give themselves over to Him . . . But look, don't worry. When you get a letter from me, it'll be because God, by means of my superiors, has arranged it thus. And when you don't get one from me . . . see that as an act of God's will, too.

In your charity, please don't compare me to Saint Bernard; the abbot of Clairvaux was an advisor to kings and popes, while I occupy the last place among the oblates of San Isidro . . . do you understand?

Besides, what else can I do? As you know, I came to La Trapa in order to be forgotten by others, as much as possible, and to remain in silence before the Tabernacle .

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<sup>772</sup> Rafael and María had thought they would be able to continue their correspondence when he returned to La Trapa, but it was not permitted. Since this was the only time Rafael ever wrote his aunt from the monastery again, it is clear this letter truly was the exception to the rule (OC 608).

. . . That is the only way I can help you . . . and perhaps more than you know. In the world, I did whatever I wanted, I sought out the consolation that my soul demanded, and my actions were for the sake of God's glory, but I was always guided by my own will and my own way of seeing things.

Now it's different, I can't do whatever I want . . . well honestly, I don't want anything, but you know what I mean. My renunciation is not yet as perfect as it ought to be, but my desire is to give myself over to Jesus in all things, and I can clearly see that obedience is the way to do that . . . If only you knew, it's not difficult when you truly see the Lord's will in even the most minor details. Anyway, it is all a great mercy.

If only you could see how much I've changed in a month . . . I am so grateful to the Lord for everything He is doing in me; I don't know what to do with myself . . . What I can say is that when I came here, I was full of desires . . . and now, I don't have any left. I see God's hand so clearly in everything, and from the bottom of my heart, I bless Him in the midst of my illness and all my sacrifices, which aren't sacrifices anymore, though they were at first . . .

If only you knew, it's so pleasant and sweet to be in God's hands . . .

Oh, sister, don't you worry, don't you cry or get upset over temporary troubles. Even if they never ended, and we had to remain on the cross until the end of the world . . . Jesus is so good and He loves us so much!

Don't be afraid of being alone . . . you should never say that, because those who love Christ are never alone, you know that perfectly well . . . I'd like to comfort you, but I don't know, this poor Trappist doesn't have much to offer.

I wish I could fly around the world and shout to every creature that they should love God, and yet that same God has bound me to His Tabernacle, so that all the shouts I'd like to let loose in the world might be transformed into loving silence for His ears only . . .

See, sister? I can't do anything . . . All I can do is pray, with faith and love, and live out Christ's words "*amare et pati*," "to love and to suffer."<sup>773</sup> I no longer want anything but God, and His will shall be mine.

I wish this letter would inspire you to put yourself completely and totally in God's hands . . . and with feeling. Then you'd see, peace and tranquility would come upon you, even in the midst of weakness and misery . . . When it does, we will desire nothing, and we won't even look for consolation from creatures, who can offer so little! . . . We can waste precious time that way.

This brings to mind two ideas from Anita's letter,<sup>774</sup> which you showed me when I visited . . . They gave me food for thought, and I've been reflecting on them a lot recently. They stuck with me, and I've come to understand one of them very clearly.

The first one went like this: "Seek out whatever is least palatable, even when it comes to love for God," or something like that. Well, little sister, I think I said something to you about this, but I think it's best not to seek out anything at all. The Lord will give us whatever He thinks apt, *according to our need*. What do we know of what we need? . . .

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<sup>773</sup> This phrase, *amare et pati*, is not drawn from the Gospel. It is unclear if Rafael is quoting the words of Christ to a specific saint here.

<sup>774</sup> Anita Solana, a friend of Rafael's (see Letter 37).

We think we need one thing, but actually we need another. We seek out consolation when the Lord wants us on the cross, and we seek out the cross when we can't handle it . . . Let us neither desire, nor seek, nor ask for anything . . . let us simply love God, and place ourselves in His hands like little children. I don't see any other way, sister, and this one is so easy!

Look, I can just say that for me, I came to La Trapa looking for one thing, and the Lord in His infinite goodness and mercy gave me something else . . . When we want a certain cross, it's not the right one, because it's ours. We should love God's cross, the cross God gives us. Am I making sense? We deceive ourselves so often on this front.

That's why I'll say it again: let the Lord work . . . He'll send you consolation and feed you with sweet nourishment when you need it, and He'll send you a cross and spiritual dryness and even send your soul into agony whenever you need that . . . and He knows what you need better than you do . . . So, you'll see, even in the midst of everything and everyone, we can have peace.

One of the other things Anita's letter said, if I remember correctly, is that she "rejoiced" (or something like that) in her "uselessness." Truly, my dear sister, it is a great thing, a tremendous mercy from God, to realize that you are useless and to be humiliated because you are of no use whatsoever, because you can't follow the Rule, because you're sick.

If only you knew how grateful I am to the Lord on that account. He has shown me my own self-love with such gentleness, and helped me see my many imperfections. It was necessary for the Lord to put me in this situation in order for my eyes to be properly opened, and for my desires to be uprooted, even my desire to be a Trappist; for me to

abandon myself in His hands, and love Him more and more every day, as I realize that He alone can satisfy my soul . . .

I needed my illness to show me that I was still attached to the world, to creatures, to my aches and pains and weaknesses. Living off alms and charity, holding God's hand tight . . . What a great mercy, Lord! I was so blind!

At first, it made me sad to take my meals in the infirmary, apart from my brothers. Now, from the bottom of my heart, I bless God. Whenever it seems to us that He is treating us harshly . . . we are so mistaken. The more He wounds us, the more He loves us . . . don't you think so?

So yes, if some priest or another wants to pray for my health . . . fine, if that's what's best, then at least I won't be as useless to the community as I am now . . . But for myself, I'll just say that not only do I not pray for my health, but in fact I "rejoice in my uselessness," which has helped me to gain knowledge of myself, to uproot so much of my self-love, and to praise God.<sup>775</sup>

Everything in the world is nothing. God alone can satisfy us. Let us not seek out creatures, because in them we'll find . . . just that, creatures. And what else? Nothing! . . . Creatures come and go, and if you take a liking to them, sooner or later the Lord will make you see that they are nothing, and then the hopes you'd had for them will disappear, and that will help you grow closer to God. He will permeate everything. You will see Him in everything, and even your weaknesses themselves will help you love Him, because despite every one of them, He loves you.

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<sup>775</sup> See 2 Cor 12:5: *On my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses.*

Do not let yourself be troubled by poverty, or illness, or the world's disregard for you . . . all of it will help you attain what the Lord has prepared for you . . . do not just accept it all, but love it, for as Saint Francis de Sales says, "The virtue of poverty is not in being poor, but in loving one's poverty."<sup>776</sup> I believe that's true of everything. Don't you think?

This is where you find yourself today, because God wishes it. So praise God for being where you are.

Everything is so easy for those who see things this way. We abandon ourselves in God with such peace and joy. We feel such great love when we realize that we are loved by God, in spite of everything, in spite of our ingratitude and lack of generosity. We are loved by God when we are sad, when we are joyful, when we are fervent, when we are lukewarm . . . What a joy it is to know you are entirely loved by God, in spite of it all.

What does it matter where we are? Who cares if we are first or last, so long as the place we have on this earth is the one that the Lord has chosen for us? . . . Let us live it well. Let us love our place on earth, because it is God's will. Let us not concern ourselves with whether it is high or low, whether we are healthy or not, whether we are on land or at sea . . . We're just passing through this place, it's of no importance to eternity, which is our true home . . . eternity with God.

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<sup>776</sup> While not a direct quote, this is essentially a summary of the saint's teaching on poverty. See Saint Francis de Sales, *Introduction to a Devout Life*, trans. John K. Ryan (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), Part III, Chapters 13, 14, and 15.

Meanwhile, let us wait, and wait with faith, patience, peace, and love, detached from ourselves, free from our own desires, seeking out neither crosses nor paths. If we are docile, the Lord will point them out to us. He'll show us our path or road, and it's all the same so long as they lead us to Him. And as I said, He'll also give us a cross without our needing to choose one . . . Let us accept it and jump for joy at our undeserved fortune in possessing it. That is what distinguishes us as lovers of Christ. Blessed be the cross that brings us closer to Him.

Anyway, I don't know what more I can say that you don't already know. There are many things I'd say, but I fear I'd be breaking silence.

Don't you worry about me. I'm neither happy nor unhappy . . . I'm with God, and that's enough for me. He'll do whatever's best for me . . . What do I know? When it's time to be glad, let us do so with joy, and when it's time to suffer, let us do that with joy too . . . It's the same Lord on Mount Tabor and Calvary, even though it's easier to find Him on Calvary.<sup>777</sup> Don't you think so?

Today, which is Sunday, when a long line of Trappists approached the Tabernacle to receive Christ, one of them was thinking of you. And not for the first time, as you can imagine. What else am I here for?

I see that you've kept up your devotion to Our Lady. I'm so glad to see that you love Her . . . We receive everything through Her . . . I haven't written anything because

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<sup>777</sup> Mount Tabor is traditionally held to have been the site of the Transfiguration of the Lord, while Calvary was the site of his Passion.



honestly I don't have time.<sup>778</sup> They've got me studying Latin in the mornings, and in the afternoons I go to work with the novices.

These days we're peeling onions. I sit down at the foot of the Cross to peel them, and by the second or third one, I've cried a whole river of tears, and they aren't all exactly tears of compunction, as you can imagine.

Whenever I do have free time, between the Stations of the Cross, a Holy Rosary for Mary, a bit of spiritual reading, and spending as much time as I can near the Tabernacle, my day is over before I know it.

I don't know anything about what's going on in the world, including the elections. We heard from Reverend Father Abbot that the Right lost, and my father was all worked up about it when he wrote me. But here, we're just doing what we always do, praying for Spain, but knowing nothing about it. If something happens, our superiors will tell us. I trust in the Virgin so much . . . There's no need to worry. Human beings can only go so far as God allows.

Right now the important thing is doing a bit of penance for Holy Lent.

They don't let me get up at two o'clock yet; I get up at three-thirty. At first this sacrifice of getting up so late was very hard for me, because I'm almost sleeping more now than I did in the world, but it's like I told you before: if there's one thing that's going to make me holy, it's obedience . . . I'll just say that it's thanks to obedience that I'm putting on weight.

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<sup>778</sup> See Letter 81, when Rafael proposed a writing project on the theme of Marian devotion.

Don't worry, the Lord will send someone to help you with everything, since I can only help you from my place near the Tabernacle . . . so I'll ask Him and Mary to do what's best. Sound good? Don't worry, everything is so brief, it's all passing away. If only the world realized that!

When you write Anita (if you know where she is), give her my regards, you can fill in the rest. I don't know why, but she is often on my mind.

As for me . . . well, don't write me for now. Would I even be able to answer whatever you have to ask me? . . . What do you have the Tabernacle for, then? And the Virgin?

Take heart, little sister. This life is full of little sacrifices, but just because they're little doesn't mean they aren't hard . . . That's what we little souls can offer the Lord. He doesn't want me to do it all, you've got to help me with some of it, alright? And even if I won't write you again because of obedience, I won't say I have as much love as Saint Bernard did, but I do have some. Someday you'll realize that. You're going to think I'm not being very humble, aren't you? But it's true.

Well, I'd like to end this letter with what I've already told you. Forgive me for being so tiresome, but until we put ourselves completely in God's hands, we won't have achieved anything at all.

But may we surrender ourselves joyfully, truly confident that the Lord will find our souls utterly indifferent to sorrow and joy alike . . . But may that indifference never become apathy, or something even worse. Do you know what I mean? May we surrender ourselves for love of Jesus, and may love be our guide, rather than the selfishness of an easy path.

May we love with joy, be glad with joy, and suffer with joy. May we see the world for what it is, may we see God in every creature, and go beyond them, disappearing from our very selves, annihilating that “I” that is such an obstacle to us. Then we will be at peace, wanting only what God wants and loving whatever He sends us . . . forgive me, but I think between that and a bit of love for the Virgin, we will become saints. But if not, well then, we’ll get as far as we get with the help of Christ Jesus.

Wishing you His peace, your brother, who remembers you at the Tabernacle,

*Brother Maria Rafael, O.C.S.O.*

P.S. Do me the favor, or rather the kindness, of not showing me “respect” as you put it. And don’t worry about the cold either, or tobacco, or anything else . . . What is all that compared to what the Lord gives me? Besides, I don’t see it as a mortification, believe me. But even if it were, isn’t it all for the love of Jesus? Then so what? Besides, don’t forget, we have Our Lady with us here.

**106. to Leopoldo Barón**

La Trapa, April 17, 1936<sup>779</sup>

J-H-S Ave Maria

My dearest brother in Jesus and Mary,

I suppose you won't be expecting a letter from me, because first of all, I don't have any news for you, or anything to say that you don't already know. However, at Easter we generally write our families, and since my parents were just here, they gave me permission to write you and wish you a happy Easter. What do you think?

Both my parents were here on Holy Saturday, and my father was here the two previous days to attend the holy Office throughout Holy Week. I was so pleased that he came, because this is the best place to spend these days in recollection. He enjoyed it very much, and left utterly pleased with La Trapa, as did my mother. They could tell that this is all so different from what the world thinks it is. Above all, they loved the peace and tranquility that the Trappists have, in the midst of the hatred that apparently dominates Spain. Even though we don't hear about anything here, we do nevertheless receive bits and pieces of news from our superiors, and as far as I can tell, the world is falling more and more under the power of darkness with each passing day.

Everything is a great mercy. Don't you think so?

Don't laugh if I ask you how things are going with your situation . . . You'll say "what's it to you" . . . well you're mistaken. I'm the same person here as I was there. Do

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<sup>779</sup> From Letter 106 through Letter 159, Rafael is 25 years old.

you remember that nephew of yours who came with you to Toro, talking about God in between conversations about notaries and tenants? . . . Well he hasn't changed . . . he's just got a hood now. And he's got those notaries and tenants at something of a distance, while he's a bit closer to God, or at least, he's in His house . . . and that's something.

Since I wrote Aunt María last time, it's your turn now, but I'm honestly telling you I can't think of anything to say that you would find interesting. You already know what kind of life we Trappists lead. And as for me, I'll just say that the Lord and the Virgin Mary have been helping me in such a way, and still are, that you could say I'm not doing anything at all.

Besides, what about creatures could still hold interest for you? And I say "still" because I imagine that you're on the true path, which is God and Him alone; and as Kempis says, "Whatever is not God is nothing, and as nothing we ought to reckon it."<sup>780</sup>

As such, why talk to you about La Trapa? Why tell you about the state of my health? If the subject is not God and God alone, this letter . . . is a waste of time, because everything else is creaturely and thus vain . . .

Believe me, brother, I've changed my ways of thinking and feeling so much . . . If you come here someday, I'll explain, if it's worth explaining. Today, I'll just tell you that I'm happy, not because I'm in La Trapa, nor on account of the peace in the air here or the silence of monastic life . . . That's all well and good, but it's not enough to satisfy the heart of someone who is in love with God . . .

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<sup>780</sup> Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, trans. Ronald Knox and Michael Oakley (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1960), 131 (III.31.3).

It is, and for me it has been, necessary to dispense with everything else, in order to be able to breathe a little bit . . .

Believe me, brother, all created things bring us toward God, but they are not God. People can bring us toward Him sometimes . . . Perhaps our desires, when they are holy, can too. But as long as our hearts are not empty and solitary, the vastness of God cannot enter in. If only you knew . . . I won't say that I'm completely detached from everything yet, but I can breathe a bit better . . . What about you?

Anyway, pay me no mind. I'm a bit mad, but I wish I could spread my madness to you.

I don't know how you're doing right now, or what your situation is like, but look, however you're doing, it doesn't matter. Everything passes, and with time, it will become clear just how brief it all is. It feels like just yesterday we were hunting turtledoves at Pedrosillo,<sup>781</sup> remember? Although in truth it's not worth remembering . . .

God is so great! When we consider Him, why should we remember what happened in the past or let ourselves be troubled by what is to come? If we have Him right now, what more could we desire?

If we truly had faith, if we truly loved God . . . and God alone . . . Oh, dear Uncle Polín, the soul gets lost so easily when thinking about Jesus's love . . . it's best to be silent, don't you think? What can I possibly say to you, poor Trappist oblate that I am? Here in my silence among men, I have so many things to say to my God . . . but what could I have to say to human beings?

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<sup>781</sup> *Pedrosillo*: Leopoldo Barón and María Osorio's former estate outside of Ávila.

Since you know me by now, and you know many of my soul's inner workings, this letter won't surprise you . . . but believe me, sometimes I am greatly saddened when I think about those who don't love God . . . and I know you aren't one of them, right? . . . Anyway, I won't say anything to you at all. What for? Besides, not everything I want to say is coming out right. I sat down to write you because I wanted to send you the Trappist "*pax tecum*," but I ended up with just the intention of doing so.<sup>782</sup> Words truly are helpless. The more we have inside, the less comes out. The best thing to do is keep silent . . . So then, I'll send you my silence. Perhaps you'll understand me a bit better that way.

Have you thought about coming here? Look, don't come to see me . . . Wow, I'm being so pretentious! . . . You know what I mean. That is, don't come for La Trapa, but rather for the God of La Trapa. I'll say it again, creatures are good in that they come from God, but God is even better . . . Believe me, I've wasted so much time, and now that I've found what I was looking for, I want to . . . well, I don't want anything . . . love God and God alone, and pay your nephew no mind, and don't think about him at all, except to commend him to Our Lady. Everything else is nothing at all.

Father Master asked me to ask you about Ana Mozo, because I told him that she wanted to enter religious life, and he's decided to look into whether it's possible and where. I am not intervening in this situation except by asking the Virgin to help her. Tell her that for me, and tell her that if her vocation is from God, she'll encounter difficulties

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<sup>782</sup> See Letter 43.

sooner or later. So let her neither be afraid, nor put her hand to the plow and look back.<sup>783</sup>  
Between her good desire and heaven's aid, everything will work out.

I'm writing you little by little, because we don't have much time and I get more of it by taking it away from other things. Don't you go thinking there's time to waste around here.

Now, since I'm doing much better, Reverend Father has given me permission to go down for Matins at night. Before, I was getting up at three-thirty. If my health stays the same, they'll move me to the novices' shared dormitory soon. Then, the only thing I'll be doing separately from the community will be my meals.

I assure you it's all the same to me, because being Trappist isn't about the exterior things, right? And holding tight to God's hand is the greatest happiness on earth . . . I've now realized that my illness is my treasure in this world . . . How great God is, brother! How well He arranges things, how He goes about His work! . . . There's nothing to do but let Him carry you. Trust me, it's easy, and when you come to have no desires at all except those of God, that's when it's all done . . . there's nothing to do but wait.

Do you remember my holy card?<sup>784</sup> Listen, often, when I visit the cemetery in the evenings, I think about it and what I wrote you on the back . . . and I think of you, and pray that the Lord we love will give you that wisdom, which is the only necessary one: the wisdom to love and wait in hope . . .

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<sup>783</sup> *Jesus said to him, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."* Luke 9:62

<sup>784</sup> See Fig. 5, "Knowing how to wait" (Letter 87).



If only you know how good it is to live like this . . . it doesn't matter where you are, or what position you find yourself in. Don't envy me for being in a monastery. What I have here, you have where you are too. In the monastery, La Trapa and the Trappists are the least important thing . . . what really matters, the only thing that matters, is the Tabernacle, in which God's greatness and grandeur is hidden . . . and you have that too. You can set up your Trapa next to any Tabernacle on earth.

Let us not live for exterior things, brother. It's all vanity, and it will pass away soon. Let us have the courage to live in Christ and Him alone . . . are we agreed?

Let us hide ourselves away with Jesus, in the mystery of the Blessed Sacrament: let us live with our hearts by the Tabernacle, and our bodies . . . well, who cares where they are? May the Lord use them as He pleases. Who cares where we are? Any place we might seek out is a good place to love God. Moreover, seeing as it's transitory and we are mere sojourners on this earth, why worry?

Listen, one time, when I had just arrived, the devil tormented me in various ways; the Lord permitted it . . . It's only natural, I am weak, and a mere man, not yet entirely given over to interior things. Anyway, what am I telling you this for . . . Well, I opened up Kempis, and I found this sentence: "Why stand gaping here? This is no place for you

to settle down.”<sup>785</sup> Truly, my dear brother, we are such fools. We pay so little heed to what the Lord told us, *there is need of only one thing*.<sup>786</sup>

Anyway, I’m not telling you anything new, as you can see, and what I do want to send your way, you may already have. Since I know some of the inner workings of your heart too, today . . . this morning, and before this letter goes out, at the Virgin Mary’s feet, after receiving the Lord, I prayed for you. I asked for many things on your behalf, but one above all . . . and that is detachment from everything and everyone, so that the Lord might flood you, and in forgetting all created things, you might think of no one but your Creator, and your soul might find the peace that only Christ may bestow.

That, my dearest brother, is what I wish for you . . . because it’s so good to live like this! Believe me, if there’s one joy to be savored in this life, it’s knowing you are loved by God.

Answer me if you want, though you know quite well it’s not necessary . . . you know what I mean. I’d write you at greater length if I had time just for me, and if they’d give me more paper, but here we must put our own desires to one side. That’s what religious life is, detaching from oneself in all things.

There are so many things I’d ask you to tell Aunt María! But I’ll be silent. I’ll just repeat what I’ve told her many times before, which is that our truest conversations take

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<sup>785</sup> Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, trans. Ronald Knox and Michael Oakley (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1960), 61 (II.1.4). The passage continues, “Heaven is your destination, and you should look upon this earthly scene only as a transit-camp.”

<sup>786</sup> Luke 10:42.

place at the foot of the Tabernacle. We can do more in silent prayer than with the noise of all the words we could imagine. Be confident of this . . . your Trappist nephew tells Jesus and Mary everything he'd like to say to his aunt and uncle. It's better that way, don't you think?

There are also many things I'd ask you, but I don't need to. I'm sure you can guess, and if you write me back, you'll know what I'm interested in hearing.

Poor Brother Rafael, he'll always be the same. They say the habit doesn't make the monk. Well, as for me, no matter how much of a monk I am, despite my hood, I'll always be your nephew . . . You know, the slightly wacky one who used to twirl around by the radio, and then go visit nuns . . .

Trust me, you don't have to change in order to become a good Trappist. God merely asks us to be simple on the outside, and loving on the inside . . . See how easy that is? "From surly-hooded monks, Lord, deliver us," as Saint Teresa used to say.<sup>787</sup> And in reality, how easy and simple are God's true paths when you walk them in a spirit of confidence, with a free heart fixed on Him.

When complications arise, it is because we don't go to God with utter suspicion of ourselves and true confidence in Him . . . It's because we look at ourselves too much, and we seek out our own preferences and desires more than what God really wants from us . . . But my dear brother, if we put our many obstacles to one side, and looked up at the

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<sup>787</sup> Rafael is playing on a saying commonly attributed to Saint Teresa, "From sour-faced saints, Lord, deliver us."

Cross and called out to Mary . . . I'm not saying we'd have God immediately . . . well, I don't know, but we'd have Him soon.

Take heart, brother. I'll help you as much as I can from here. Let's see if we can manage not just joy, but the "skill of jubilation," as Saint Augustine said.<sup>788</sup>

Well, that's enough *citations* from me, I don't want you to call me a tiresome pedant. That's all for today. Forgive everything I said if you don't agree. My regards to Aunt María and my cousins, and as for you . . . blessed be God, I can't think of a single thing

*Brother María Rafael*

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<sup>788</sup> In his commentary on Psalm 33:3, Saint Augustine writes, "*Sing unto Him a new song; sing unto Him a song of the grace of faith. Sing skillfully unto Him with jubilation; sing skillfully unto Him with rejoicing*" (*Expositions on the Psalms*, trans. J.E. Tweed, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff [Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1888] 33.3).

**107. Dedication of a holy card to Leopoldo Barón**

La Trapa, June 14, 1936

Brother,

Whether in the cloister or in the world, whether in peace or at war, only one thing matters: loving God. All wisdom and all virtue are found there.

In loving God, you will be happy in this life, you will always know peace, and one day, you'll die happy.

Here at La Trapa, your brother is praying to the Most Blessed Virgin, that She might enlighten you and guide you along the wide path of love for Jesus.

Everything else . . . believe me, it's nothing. It comes and goes . . . and as Saint Teresa said, "God alone suffices, who possesses God nothing wants."<sup>789</sup>

Don't forget about your brother.

*Brother María Rafael*

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<sup>789</sup> From a poem by Saint Teresa of Ávila: "Let nothing trouble you, / Let nothing scare you, / All is fleeting, / God alone is unchanging. / Patience / Everything obtains. / Who possesses God / Nothing wants. / God alone suffices" ("Efficacy of Patience," in *Collected Works*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodríguez [Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1976], 3:386).

## 108. Meditations of a Trappist

Fig. 9<sup>790</sup>


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<sup>790</sup> Rafael drew this cover for the notebook he titled *Meditations of a Trappist*. The quote from Saint Teresa that follows was inscribed on the inside front cover as an epigraph. See manuscript photographs in Juan Antonio Martínez Camino, *Mi Rafael* (Bilbao: Desclée de Brouwer, 2003), 242–244. Image source: Antonio Cobos Soto, *La "pintura mensaje"*

“I live without living in myself,  
And in such a way I hope,  
I die because I do not die.”

–Saint Teresa<sup>791</sup>

“**How Great God Is!**”<sup>792</sup>

La Trapa, July 12, 1936

With the help of the Virgin Mary, to whom I dedicate these ramblings, meditations, monologues, impressions, etc., since you could really call them anything, I begin this notebook, in which I hope to expel something of the excessive verbiage that the Lord has given me.

It’s true, with a pen in my hands, not a moment goes by when I can’t think of something to say or talk about . . . Perhaps that’s a fault of mine . . . I don’t know. What I

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*del hermano Rafael* (Burgos: Monte Carmelo y Monasterio de San Isidro de Dueñas, 1989), 239.

<sup>791</sup> Saint Teresa of Ávila, “Aspirations toward Eternal Life,” trans. Adrian J. Cooney, O.C.D. In *Collected Works*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1976), 3:375.

<sup>792</sup> While Rafael did divide *Meditations of a Trappist* into individual entries or “meditations,” he left them untitled. His mother, Mercedes Barón, gave them titles when she prepared his writings for publication in 1947 (Juan Antonio Martínez Camino, *Mi Rafael* [Bilbao: Desclée de Brouwer, 2003], 242).

know for certain is that God asks me to remain silent among His creatures, and I do so with pleasure. Seen rightly, of course, it's not the sacrifice the world thinks it is, because keeping your mouth closed puts your heart to rest, and it allows you to speak to Him . . . He offers Himself to me in the Tabernacle, where He remains day and night solely to attend to my every request . . . He comes to my soul through Communion in order to sustain me in my monastic life. He listens to me in my silent prayer . . . And lastly, He gives me blank paper and . . . allows me to write.

“How great God is!”

When the monk looks out at the external world that surrounds him and contemplates the wonders of creation, if truly in love with Him, that is what his heart must first exclaim.

“How great God is!”

Thus he exclaims once more when, closing his eyes to all created things, all external things, he refocuses his sight on his own soul, seeks Him out within his own heart, and withdraws into silence.

“How great God is!”

That is the Trappist's only and constant meditation as he follows the Rule in silence, whether he follows it well or poorly. At the end of the day, he is a man, and an imperfect one at that, but it doesn't matter . . . What can be expected of such rough clay? . . . It doesn't matter. Even among his weakness and misery, “how great God is!” Even when his eyes are still heavy with sleep as he sings in the choir . . .

“How great God is!” when the law of his life, which is God's law, calls him to go to work and he bends down over the earth, hunched over and sweating.



“How great God is!” . . . when in the silence of the cloisters, he waits faithfully with a peaceful face for the Lord to call him . . .

“How great God is!” . . .

And when at last the sun is going down and the day is coming to an end, that Trappist brings his day to a close by prostrating himself before the Virgin Mary and placing his day’s work at Her feet. “How great God is!”

Honestly, with that said, I could finish my writing right here. What else could I add?

I wanted to begin at the end . . . but in the spiritual life, the interior life, there are no beginnings or endings . . . there is only God, and after any reflection one always looks at oneself in one way or another and realizes how little we are, how trivial and insignificant . . . we are nothing compared to Him. The soul is left merely with an impression that is so difficult to explain . . . An impression of God’s vastness, His greatness . . . A feeling that makes words fall short, that makes the soul wish it couldn’t see itself anymore, wish it could disappear, no longer be or exist, just God’s greatness . . . Anyway, I’m getting lost.

## 109. Meditations of a Trappist

### “Knowing How to Wait”

La Trapa, July 12, 1936

In La Trapa, we Trappists have a consolation that is little known in the world . . . Here in the house of God, away from all that hustle and bustle, we can clearly see how short everything is as time passes . . . The world knows it too, but it's different.

When the world talks about how quickly life passes, it does so with a hint of sadness. It laments how short-lived everything is . . . People often live in the past, and what good does it do them? . . . They don't change their ways. They just use whatever time they have left to keep searching for the things they didn't find in the life they've already lived. Then their final years come, and then they become even more aware of their nostalgia for the past and how short-lived everything is . . . Old age is so sad, according to the world.

In La Trapa, monks don't care about the past . . . They just have the great consolation of knowing that whatever remains of this life will pass, too. What more is there to do, then, but wait? And they wait with such joy and peace, certain of what is to come.

What peace it brings to the soul to think that neither human beings nor world events can hinder the coming of what awaits us . . . With each passing day, we are a step closer to the beginning of our true lives. What the world sees as the end is what the monk sees as the beginning. Everything comes, everything goes . . . only God remains.

## 110. Meditations of a Trappist

### “A Worldly Youth”

La Trapa, July 19, 1936

Ave Maria

It is seven in the morning on a bright July day. Through the vines covering the novitiate window, sunlight is streaming in, if somewhat weakly . . . A multitude of birds are singing among the stalks of wheat, and from time to time, a partridge’s harsh tune pierces through their concert.

Silence reigns in the monastery, as always, and the monks all devote themselves to occupying the free time permitted to them by the Rule in a holy way, between breakfast and the conventual Mass.

Entrusting myself to my Mother, Mary, I have taken up my pen and notebook, and alternating my gaze between the sun as it passes through the leaves on the vines and the crucifix I have before me, I have decided to write for a little while.

It is so difficult to put a Trappist’s impression of La Trapa into words.

Some years ago now, a worldly youth stopped by this abbey,<sup>793</sup> his head full of . . . Well, I don’t know what was in that man’s head. He spent a few days staying with these good monks, and since he was a lover of music, color, and anything with an element of

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<sup>793</sup> Rafael’s first visit to La Trapa took place on September 23, 1930, a visit he described in Letter 5. Here, he was most likely describing his second visit for a retreat beginning on June 26, 1932.

art about it, he was deeply moved when he heard them sing the psalmody in choir . . . He was touched by the silence of these men who live a good life away from the world. He delighted in the ineffable as he saw white-clad men working in spring-clad fields, full of flowers in bloom. With the sweat of their brow and the calluses of their hands, they were helping one another provide for their bodies as long as they remain in exile, while at the same time, they were working to earn their rest in their true Homeland.

When that worldly young man saw what he saw, his soul underwent a change, and perhaps the Lord God of the Trappists made use of the perception of his senses to make him think.

And the young man thought.

Today, he's just another Trappist in the choir, another worker in the field, and a man who, desiring to forget the world, seeks out silence among creatures and peace with God.

He saw art in that scene at the abbey years ago, an occasion for delight . . . Everything played a part in making an impression on him . . . the austere monks dressed in white; their silence; the sometimes deep ring of the large bell, and the cheerful jingle of the little bell; the cloisters flooded with sunlight; the long line of monastery residents crossing fields of wheat as they returned from work.

That young man thought. God made use of all these external things in order to help His divine light penetrate that somewhat starry-eyed soul.

How great is the Lord's mercy!

Some years passed, and the man traded his worldly clothes for a Cistercian monk's habit. He exchanged his old ways as a man of the world for the simple Rule handed down to us by our father Saint Benedict.

He changed the course of his life. Leaving to one side the world's torturous paths that lead to wellbeing, fortune, and perhaps even glory, he left behind his career. He directed his steps and thoughts toward the way that leads to eternal life, the way followed then and now by those who love God.

Everything underwent a transformation, and so that he was left with nothing from before, his way of feeling began to change, too.

Now, he is no longer a spectator, but an integral part of the scene that he had admired those years ago; and to the great surprise of his soul, he has come to realize that one thing was missing among the impressions made upon his senses . . . a feeling for God was missing from the scene.

That beauty touched him deeply, but even in those external things, he had not yet seen God. Now, it's different . . . Now that Trappist, who was once that young, restless dreamer . . . doesn't care so much about the bells or birds, or even the sun. Now, with Mary's help, he has come to see that the most important thing in a monastery is God.

He no longer sings the praises of art made by creatures, but by God. He is no longer all that moved by the colors of the field, except insofar as he sees their Creator in them.

Now he has come to understand that all external things are vanity . . . That whatever touches only the senses is smoke, and like smoke, it too disappears without a

trace . . . Flowers wither, the cheerful springtime sun turns pale and sad in winter, the birds of the sky hide away, and the emerald-green fields lose their color.

Everything passes . . . Man grows old, and at last, dies. Behold the one and only truth: God alone remains.

All that worldly young man's thoughts as he contemplated La Trapa have now been transformed into just one thing, something he didn't have before: God. Who cares about the color of the habit? Who cares if the bells sound high or low? For our purposes, what does it matter if it's winter or summer? Let us dispense with all external things, and let only God and pure faith make an impression on us.

This is why it is so difficult for a Trappist to write about his impressions of La Trapa.

Visitors from the world can find sufficient cause in these Cistercian abbeys to meditate, think, and reflect, and if their soul is somewhat artistic, they'll enjoy the silence and peace of the monastery, but make no mistake, God isn't in all that. Rather, one must dispense with all that in order to encounter God.

Now, as he contemplates the tranquil skies of Castile, that Trappist sees in them the grandeur of God. His soul is immersed in the goodness of the Creator. Lifting his heart up above the things of earth, letting go of his senses, and seeing the vanity of it all, he exclaims, "Lord, You are admirable in Your creatures. You reveal Yourself to my soul by means of them, but You do not allow me to remain fixed on them. The sky, the earth, and all that dwell in them are beautiful, but they are not You, and I want to reach You by means of everything and everyone."

And as for that Trappist all dressed in white, working and sweating in the Castilian countryside under his wide straw hat and the blazing summer sun, surrounded by flowers, or perhaps by thorns . . . he notices none of it, not the sun, not the sky, neither the heat nor the cold. No, he has eyes for nothing but God. And if ever the sound of the monastery bell reaches his ears, without lifting his gaze from the ground, he offers up a prayer to God who, humbly hidden in the church Tabernacle, awaits and anticipates him. God is waiting for that Trappist to finish his work and come into His presence, showing Him the fruit of his labor, which has nothing to do with the number of hours spent working, or whether he worked in the vineyard or the orchard, or using a hoe or a rake. Rather, it is about the inward intention, hidden from the eyes of men, with which that Trappist worked.

God alone should occupy the soul. Peace is not the result of silence, or the cloister cypresses, or birdsong . . . For the Trappist, peace is God, and there is nothing in La Trapa of any value but Him.

It is now nine in the morning. The sun, still streaming in through the window from in between the vines, has moved a few centimeters. The birds are still singing. The silence of the monastery is interrupted only by the sound of the organ, where a priest is practicing for Mass. All of this is very beautiful, very poetic . . . but this poor Trappist oblate is going to dispense with it, put away his pen, close his notebook, and before they ring the bell for Holy Mass, he will go and spend a few minutes at the threshold of the Tabernacle. Closing the eyes of his body, and also those of his soul, he will say . . . “Lord, You alone . . . You alone remain . . . There is nothing under the sun that satisfies the heart of man but You.”

And my heart is thirsting for You, and it seeks You as deer do flowing streams, as David says.<sup>794</sup> Everything outside of You is darkness.

Help me, O Virgin Mary, to obtain the only thing that can satisfy my soul . . . and that is Christ Jesus. May it be so.

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<sup>794</sup> *As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, the living God (Psalm 42:1–2b).*



**111. Meditations of a Trappist**  
**“What Will Happen in Spain?”<sup>795</sup>**

La Trapa, July 19, 1936<sup>796</sup>

The same day.

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<sup>795</sup> The Spanish Civil War officially began July 17, 1936, with a military uprising led by General Francisco Franco against the government of the Second Spanish Republic. Broadly speaking, the war was a conflict between the right-wing Nationalists and the left-wing Republicans; on a practical level, each side consisted of a complex ideological alliance that varied by region. For an overview of the conflict’s origins, politics, and course, see Paul Preston, *The Spanish Civil War: Reaction, Revolution, and Revenge*, Revised and Expanded Edition (New York: W. W. Norton, 2007) or Helen Graham, *The Spanish Civil War: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005). Franco declared victory for the Nationalists on April 1, 1939 and ruled as dictator of Spain until his death in 1975.

<sup>796</sup> On July 18, 1936, Rafael’s father and brother Leopoldo left their family home in Oviedo to join his mother Mercedes and sister Merceditas in Burgos. The four of them planned to flee to Lisbon, Portugal, but ultimately rode out the war in Villasandino, a small town outside Burgos. Rafael’s brother Luis Fernando was studying in Belgium when the war broke out, though he later returned to Spain to serve in the Nationalist-allied military (OC 638).

I'd hardly put down my pen and gone down to the chapel when, while we were in choir waiting for Mass to begin, there was a stir among the monks . . . Just one priest came out to say Mass rather than the usual three . . . The bells didn't ring, and we spoke the Office<sup>797</sup> . . . When we left the chapel, we learned only that there's a revolution in Spain, that you can see soldiers on the road, and that there's talk of an uprising . . . I know nothing more. Just that we can't hear any trains . . . it looks like there's a strike on.

We are in God's hands. What will happen in Spain? . . . I don't know anything. No news reaches us novices.

There's something of a disturbance among the priests and brothers. Anyway, God alone. Perhaps they're just fears, and fears that are coming from the world, but no matter how indifferent one may be to what comes from the world . . . when you realize we are surrounded by hostile towns with people who hate us . . . you cannot remain unaffected.

These are difficult times, but it doesn't matter. "Whoever possesses God nothing wants."<sup>798</sup> Whatever people might do to us,<sup>799</sup> the most they can take from us is our lives . . . and a Trappist's life isn't worth all that much . . . Nothing, really. As for me, of course, while I have life, I will use it in God's service. When He takes it from me, in one way or another, that's all right. My life is His, and as such, it is at His disposal . . . I can't understand how a monk could fear death.

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<sup>797</sup> *We spoke the Office*: That is, rather than singing it.

<sup>798</sup> From a poem by Saint Teresa of Ávila (see Dedication 107).

<sup>799</sup> In the original, Rafael inserted the word *do* (*hacer*) between the lines as a correction (OC 637).

Oh, what a great joy it would be if I could give my life for Jesus . . . I'm afraid I won't be so lucky. But if the Lord grants that my sojourn should end in martyrdom . . .

Anyway . . . what am I saying. It's best to be content no matter what events God sends us. Whether they belong to peacetime or revolution . . . Nothing happens in this world that He has not foreseen in His infinite goodness, and creatures will not go any further than God allows them to.

Anyway, "God alone suffices,"<sup>800</sup> and we rest in the hands of the Virgin Mary. It's sad not hearing the bells.

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<sup>800</sup> Ibid.

## 112. Meditations of a Trappist

*“The Nations are in an Uproar”*<sup>801</sup>

La Trapa, July 24, 1936

Ave Maria

By the grace of God, I’ve been in the infirmary for a few days. I had a bad reaction to something, and it put me on bedrest for a day.

I’m nearly well now. In these days when Spain is undergoing anxiety, the Lord wanted me to remain in silence and withdrawal, separated from my brother novices. Blessed be God forever.

I still don’t know what’s going on outside the monastery walls. I know there’s a war on, or something like that . . . Last Monday (today is Friday), while I was resting in bed, a bit tired from my fever, I heard two things at once . . . through the door to my room, I heard clearly the sound of the organ and the voices of the monks as they sang the Office of Vespers in choir. At the same time, through the window, I could hear gunshots and the rattling of a machine gun here and there. I could still hear some gunshots yesterday.

The news I’m getting is all mixed up . . . They say there’s communism in Madrid, that there are fascist armies coming up into Spain from the south . . . I can’t hear any trains . . . We heard a few yesterday, but not on the regular schedule . . . In short, everything is confusing.

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<sup>801</sup> Ps 46:6.

From the quiet of my room, I raise a prayer to God for all those who are fighting and dying.

It's sad to think about the hatred that dominates humanity . . . among brothers and sisters who share a Homeland. There was also talk that they were going to burn us<sup>802</sup> . . . Praise God . . . it wouldn't be a bad thing if they did. As for me, I can say that I am willing, because I know that martyrdom is like baptism, and of course, it would be a very lovely way to enter into heaven.

But for now, that's not how it is. The Trappist's martyrdom is not at the stake or down the barrel of a gun . . . God asks something else of us. God asks us to live this life while we are still separated from Him, and for a little while, we suffer the hardships of the body, the miseries of the spirit, and the weaknesses of the flesh . . . Behold, the true martyrdom of one who loves God and yearns for the peace of eternal life.

The people of this world have gone mad . . . Why are they killing each other? I don't understand it. But I can clearly see that what some want, others do not; what some have, others desire and want to take it from them; some say this, others say that, but everyone wants to be in charge . . . First, they disagree; then, they argue; then, they hate

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<sup>802</sup> According to Rafael's confessor, Fr. Teófilo Sandoval, "On July 19, two large vans of Republican fighters armed with pistols, carbines, and rifles surrounded the monastery, threatening the monks. A small group of soldiers came from Palencia to drive them away . . . [The Republicans] had planned to strip the monks naked and burn them alive in the town square of Dueñas, along with the local Teresian Sisters and parish priest, Don Fulgencio, whom they had captured a few days prior" (testimony quoted in OC 637).

each other; and finally, they will kill each other . . . Behold, the law that the evil spirit has smuggled into the world, displacing the law of Christ: *love one another*.<sup>803</sup>

I am so happy that I am a Trappist, and at something of a distance from the fight . . . not for selfish reasons, because I don't mind suffering, much less dying. Rather, far from all that infighting, with a tranquil spirit, I can hear shouts of hatred and smell the gunfire, and then lift my eyes to heaven and truly exclaim David's words: *God is our refuge and strength*.<sup>804</sup>

*The nations are in an uproar, the kingdoms totter; he utters his voice, the earth melts, but the Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge*.<sup>805</sup>

The one who truly counts on God for everything possesses such joyful confidence in the midst of all the world's disasters. *Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea*.<sup>806</sup>

The soul stretches upon encountering these words of Psalm 46, upon which I have been meditating these past few days. It pains me to think that so many of my brothers and sisters, alienated from the truth, place their hopes in earthly goals, in passing prosperity, and in power that will not last. Blinded by pride, they don't realize that God is the one moving them about, like puppets in His hands . . . They don't stop to consider that

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<sup>803</sup> Mt 19:19, 22:39; Lk 10:25–37; Jn 13:34–35.

<sup>804</sup> Ps 46:1.

<sup>805</sup> Ps 46:6–7.

<sup>806</sup> Ps 46:2.

*Surely everyone goes about like a shadow.*

*Surely for nothing they are in turmoil;*

*they heap up, and do not know who will gather.*<sup>807</sup>

How great is God! And how small and wicked is humanity! How blind they are! There is so much madness in the world! *He who sits in the heavens laughs.*<sup>808</sup> Terrifying words that make one tremble, and are not often meditated upon . . . God's wrath is to be feared, and so too His rage. Someday it will shake the whole earth, on the day when we shall all be judged. But what one's soul cannot understand, and what makes every fiber of one's body tremble, is God's "laugh" as He watches the nations conspire against Him.

"Enough! Acknowledge that I am God. I have dominion over the nations and all the earth."<sup>809</sup>

Anyway, what can this poor Trappist do but silently lament how God's creatures have forgotten Him, lift my heart up above all this misery, make Him my *refuge and strength*, and wait in hope?

*Beatus vir, cujus est nomen Domini spes ejus.*<sup>810</sup>

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<sup>807</sup> Ps 39:6.

<sup>808</sup> Ps 2:4.

<sup>809</sup> Rafael's paraphrase of Ps 46:10: *Be still, and know that I am God! I am exalted among the nations, I am exalted in the earth.*

<sup>810</sup> *Happy are those who make the Lord their trust* (Ps 40:4).

### 113. Meditations of a Trappist

#### “The Circus Clown”

La Trapa, July 24, 1936

Once upon a time there was a circus clown who would fall over whenever he entered the ring . . . he'd walk around dragging his huge shoes, and with great effort, he'd manage to smooth out the corner of the rug. Just when he thought he'd got it, he'd trip . . . he'd smooth out the rug again, and fall down . . . he'd sweat . . . His job was just to get a chair out . . . In order to do that, he'd roll up his sleeves, wipe the sweat from his brow with a huge handkerchief, drag the chair into the ring as if pulling an enormous weight, and finally, he'd sit down on it. Everybody would laugh at him for being so proud as he exited, thinking he'd helped the others get their equipment, tools, and rugs ready so that the artists could go about their work.

I know a Trappist who is the “circus clown” of La Trapa. His whole performance consists of “stage business,” dragging his feet around and wiping away his sweat.

That poor man makes the angels laugh as they look down from heaven upon the spectacle that is this earth. He might not run the same risks that the other artists do, or make death-defying jumps, or perform feats of strength, or do twists and turns on the trapeze . . . But what does it matter if all he knows how to do is smooth out a rug? With that he earns the angels' applause! . . .

There's just one small difference. That circus clown thought he was doing something, and the praise he received from the audience for his humor made him vain, and he waved to them with satisfaction.



Meanwhile, this Trappist *can't hear* his audience's praise . . . He *plays* the fool, but he doesn't have anybody to wave at, and if they're laughing up in heaven, he can't see it. Besides, since he's no fool, he doesn't really believe that he's doing anything . . . just doing what he can, dragging his feet, wiping the sweat from his brow with a huge bandana.

## 114. Meditations of a Trappist

### “Silence”

La Trapa, July 25, 1936

Feast of Saint James the Greater, Apostle

Ave Maria

One of the most consoling things in Cistercian monastic life . . . is silence; above all, those particular hours when silence is imposed as obligatory. We need that silence. It is the consolation of the Trappist, the refuge of the afflicted and distressed, the mirth of the joyful, and the happiness of those in love with God.

It is in silence that the monk finds balm for his wounds, and sometimes for his distress . . . It is in monastic silence that the soul who delights in God hides his joys . . .

One loves God better in silence. Suffering is more effective in silence . . . Consolation that creatures cannot give can often be found in silence.

How beautiful and lovely silence is! It is such a great help to the soul that seeks God! . . . And once we have found God, it helps us keep Him there without *profaning* His presence!

Some days, a certain Trappist’s soul finds its happiness in maintaining silence.

That Trappist wouldn’t trade places with anybody. What the world sees as a penance is heaven on earth for him.

When the hours of the night pass by slowly . . . that same night which the monk uses to pray before God . . . When all of nature is sleeping, and darkness itself invites the soul to prayer and recollection . . . When, during those serene hours, that brother draws

close to the altar of God, and receives the Creator of the night into his heart, the God who made those star-studded skies . . . Then, when the soul is surrounded by peace on the outside and flooded with light on the inside, when darkness envelops the monastery and divine splendor illumines the heart . . . that is when silence is necessary.

The sun, as if ashamed to disrupt the peaceful night, slowly peeks out over the horizon . . . A gentle mist hugs each aspect of the landscape . . . Creation begins to awaken; little by little, everything is flooded with light . . . The monastery church has a window above the main altar . . . Light streams through it, and the soft light of dawn both wounds and caresses the statue of the Virgin Mary . . . it reaches the sanctuary and even finds the choir . . . finally, we can read clearly from those enormous books . . .

In the same way that the light God sends to the world each morning floods everything . . . so too is the monk's soul flooded with joy, peace, and gratitude to the Lord who is so good to human beings . . .

Then, when everything comes alive, when the birds disturb the cemetery with their song, when the calm of prayer is exchanged for the tools of manual work . . . When the monk begins his work day, perhaps he is going to suffer . . . then the soul of this man, realizing that life on earth is struggle and that he is still in exile, raises his heart up above everything and asks the help of God, to whom he offers the day's work; he embraces each day's cross; and thinking of the Virgin, he takes refuge in silence . . . in the silence that helps him preserve the prayer of the night . . . And in that silence, he makes an offering to God: sometimes the sweat of his brow, sometimes the cold, but always his work, no matter what it may be.

How beautiful is the silence of a Trappist as he works . . . The soul stretches as it loses itself in God's greatness, manifested in the skies under which the monk is working . . . All of creation is subject to human hands . . . everything sings God's praises . . . the wheat, the flowers, the mountains, and the sky . . . Together, they perform a concert with sublime harmony. Nothing is missing, and nothing is superfluous. Everything God makes is well made . . .

Sometimes the Trappist's soul is on earth, clawing away at clods of dirt, and sometimes it is in heaven, blessing God . . . but it is always in silence . . . although sometimes he interrupts that silence in order to sing to the Virgin . . . or so I hear.

## 115. Meditations of a Trappist

### “The Day Goes By”

La Trapa, July 25, 1936

The day is going by . . . Holy Mass calls us to choir . . . what can I say? God comes down to console human beings who are still living on the earth.

How could the soul not rejoice, then, upon realizing that it doesn't matter if the work is hard or the body is tired . . . God is with us . . . every day and every hour, though at the most solemn moments of conventual Mass, it does seem that the Lord loves us more . . . When He gathers together all of us brothers, and at the request of a mere man, He comes down from heaven, and in order not to intimidate our nature, He does so under the species of bread and wine so that we might adore Him.

And we monks, prostrating ourselves on the ground, adore Him in silence too . . . How great God is! And when the bell summons us to the refectory, reminding us that the body needs tending to, we take refuge in silence then also, and we hide the humiliation of our physical being there while our souls keep thinking and adoring the God who manifested Himself on the altar . . . How great is God!

In other religious orders, they have this so-called “recreation” . . . Sometimes I wonder, if we Trappists were given time to talk, what would be the point? The Rule is so well arranged. Our greatest recreation is to go without it . . . We don't miss it. It would annoy us to have to break our silence . . . having to talk to one another would be distracting to us . . . Our conversations would disturb God's presence, or at least rob us of our peace, because it is very difficult not to offend God in one's speech, you could almost

say it's impossible not to.<sup>811</sup> The Rule does permit us to speak when absolutely necessary, and to one's superiors, etc . . . But recreation? That we are never to have . . . Saint Benedict must have set it up that way for a reason.

Humans are human . . . And even as Trappists, we'll always be human . . . So the silence is a good thing. We came to the monastery in order to seek God, at a distance from people and the world. Let us be quiet, then, and let's not talk to people about the world. The greater our silence, the closer we will be to God, and the further we will be from the world we want to forget.

The monk has sacred reading and prayer for his recreation. What more could he want? In this way, before he knows it, the day goes by . . . Work or study reclaims his attention once again in the afternoon, and when the day comes to an end and the sun starts to go down, the choir calls us back to pray Vespers.

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<sup>811</sup> “Indeed, so important is silence that permission to speak should seldom be granted even to mature disciples, no matter how good or holy or constructive their talk, because it is written: *In a flood of words you will not avoid sin* (Prov 10:19)” (RB 6.3–4).

## 116. Meditations of a Trappist

### “The Hour of Vespers”

La Trapa, July 25, 1936

Vespers . . . afternoon prayer . . . A time of peace and hope, when the soul is at rest, happy to find that another day has gone by.

Vespers mark the end of our work day . . . Everything passes . . . Soon, night will be here again.

Vespers . . . the sun reaches into the chapel obliquely through a window, lighting up the Tabernacle . . . it is red . . . its rays are weak, and they come up against the altar gently . . . as if kissing it. Our chanting is solemn . . . and the Magnificat to the Most Blessed Virgin is moving.<sup>812</sup>

Vespers . . . afternoon prayer . . . a prayer of rest, if there is rest to be found on this earth. A time when the soul comes to see that everything passes . . . The day’s tasks have passed . . . Sorrows, if there were any, have passed; joys have passed . . . the day has passed, and with it, we too are passing, sometimes dragging the cross behind us, other times on the wings of consolation . . .

Everything has passed, and we’re another day closer to our end . . . We hardly notice, and already the sun that awoke creation this morning is inviting it to rest now . . . As it starts going down, it makes us think about how everything in the world remains on

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<sup>812</sup> *Magnificat*: the Canticle of Mary (Luke 1:46–55), prayed daily during the hour of Vespers.

the path that God has ordained for it, never stopping. Everything stays its course . . .

Everything has its purpose . . . Everything has an end, suffering just the same as joy.

Vespers . . . prayer at twilight . . . the prayer in which the soul asks God for the peace of a good end.

The Trappist asks the Lord for the joy of a holy death.

Those moments of great solemnity during the psalmody, with great peace in one's heart, bring such consolation! . . . The hour of Vespers contains so much joy! What a happy thought, that the day is now spent . . . and it was spent before the Tabernacle of the Lord . . .

The soul is so moved upon having completed another day in the Lord's service. Our hearts are so grateful for the sublime privilege of having been able to spend the day singing before the Lord . . .

In such moments, the soul longs to fly up to the glorious heights of heaven, in order to keep singing there alongside the angels, the saints, the Virgin . . . The soul wishes the day would never end . . . that Vespers would go on eternally . . . The soul wants to hold back the sun . . . and rise up to heaven with a *Gloria Patri*.<sup>813</sup>

Anyway, the ramblings of a mad monk.

But it's true that for me in particular, this is one of the Hours of the Office that moves me the most.

As I said, everything contributes toward the solemnity of that Hour . . . How sweet it is to spend a sunset singing in choir! It is a most propitious hour for meditation

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<sup>813</sup> The *Gloria Patri* (Glory Be) is prayed at the conclusion of each psalm during Vespers.



and prayer! I believe that when Jesus of Nazareth, our divine Redeemer, was on this earth, it was at the hour of twilight that He would speak to His disciples of heaven and His Father's love as they walked along the wheat fields of Galilee . . . and He would console them, promising to remain among humanity until the end of the age.<sup>814</sup>

It must have been at this serene hour when our Lord spoke to them about how short life is, and how we must place our love in God alone . . . It must have been this hour when Christ flooded the souls of His disciples with light, and filled them with supernatural hope . . . How serene that time spent with Jesus of Nazareth among the wheat fields of Galilee must have been.

But we are no longer in those biblical times . . . not that it matters. The same sky that was covering Palestine then, we are seeing right now. The same sun that shone on Jesus comes up every day. The same words Christ spoke to His disciples were left to us, written down so that they might bring us consolation and so that as our souls, like theirs, are filled with hope at this hour . . . in this time of afternoon prayer . . . we might raise ourselves up above the earth, we see how short-lived everything is, and think only of the love of a God so good that He has permitted us to spend the day in His presence. The hymns, psalms, and prayers of this Hour of the Office . . . are infused with love, faith, hope, and charity . . .

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<sup>814</sup> *Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age* (Matthew 28:20).

Let us know how to collect ourselves in the silence of our hearts, and let us thank the Lord for the joy of knowing that, just as the day ends with the Virgin Mary's help,<sup>815</sup> so too will our lives as Trappists . . . Our lives of prayer and sacrifice, silence and love.

How great God is!

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<sup>815</sup> At San Isidro, every Hour of the Divine Office would be preceded by the corresponding Hour from the Little Office of the Blessed Virgin Mary. While the Little Office fell out of practice after Vatican II, Trappists still end each Hour with an invocation to Mary.

## 117. Meditations of a Trappist

### “How to Be Happy”

La Trapa, July 26, 1936

Ave Maria

Yesterday and today, as they are feast days, I’ve had a lot of free time . . . and so I can spend it writing down my thoughts, as I have been doing up to now.

Today is Sunday, and at the moment it is seven in the morning on a beautiful July day. I have already heard the holy Mass, at which I received the Lord . . . I heard the word of God at chapter<sup>816</sup> through our Father Abbot, who spoke to the community about the duties of fraternal correction . . . And then I had breakfast, and afterward I went to pray a *Salve* to the Immaculate Virgin in the little chapel next to the main altar.

Now I have before me a crucifix made of iron and a portrait of the Virgin Mary, cut from a newspaper and pasted on cardboard . . . It is an image of Our Lady of

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<sup>816</sup> *Chapter*: This refers to a gathering of the entire monastic community, named for the historic purpose of such meetings: reflecting on a chapter from the Rule of Saint Benedict. At San Isidro, the community would gather for such reflection every morning after the hour of Prime (*La vida cisterciense en el monasterio de San Isidro de Dueñas* [Burgos: Tipografía de «El Monte Carmelo», 1923], 85). The hour of Prime fell out of practice after Vatican II, and with it, the frequency and purpose of chapter meetings were modified at many monasteries.

Solitude,<sup>817</sup> which a pious soul sent me in a letter that included these words: “How can anyone complain of their suffering?”

There is a window on my left, through which the morning breeze reaches me . . . along with a fly or two.

I have two hours ahead of me . . . Two hours of peace and quiet . . . And on top of all that, a heart in love with God . . . and pen and paper . . . I have, then, reasons (except for the flies) to be happy.

Truly, how little it takes to make a Trappist brother happy. If I were in the world, perhaps I would be thinking about some complicated excursion, the more complicated the better . . . I would surely have paced through the house a thousand times in circles, not knowing what outfit to put on. I would have read the newspaper headlines, without absorbing the news. I would have given the piano a smack or two and turned on the radio, and in the end, I would have decided not to do anything, which is the most comfortable choice.

Lord, Lord, what a complicated life they lead in the world . . . How much time I wasted . . . How difficult it is for people to be happy.

Meanwhile here, in the peace of my monastery, how well we live without anything . . . Without newspapers or radios . . . with only one outfit that we never take

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<sup>817</sup> *Our Lady of Solitude*: The devotion to Mary under the title of Our Lady of Solitude, in commemoration of Mary’s solitude on Holy Saturday, is common in Spain. The specific image Rafael references here was of the patroness of the Confraternity of Mena (*Congregación de Mena*), an association of lay faithful in Málaga, Spain.

off, not even to sleep . . . With our Rule that sets our schedule and tells us what we must do, with the assurance that what we are doing is the will of God . . .

How good life is without the complications of the world . . . In silence and in detachment. How many reasons I have to thank God for my vocation . . . my vocation that is based on seeking God in the plainness and simplicity of everything.

How happy the Trappist is—one who is truly Trappist, not just in external things but in internal simplicity.

For those of us who were somewhat complicated in the world . . . Well, I can't explain it, but I have come to understand those words of Jesus: *Unless you become like children.*<sup>818</sup>

How many things the world needs to be happy . . . ! To be happy on their terms . . . and seen from a Trappist perspective, how little they settle for! . . . For not even a million planets loaded with riches would be enough to equal a single act of love for God from the most humble Trappist oblate.

The world says to the monk: you're crazy, leaving everything behind and finding your happiness in nothing. But the monk says to the world: not at all, it's exactly the other way around . . . I have left behind nothing in order to have everything.

The truth is that I have nothing here, neither my own will nor my freedom, but in exchange I have God . . . this God that you cannot give me. In short, there are some things that do not compare.

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<sup>818</sup> Matt 18:3

Question:

Why would God create flies?

Answer:

So that I would put my hood up.

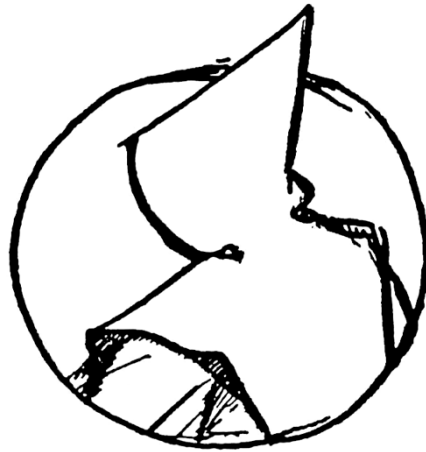


Fig. 10<sup>819</sup>

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<sup>819</sup> Image source: Antonio Cobos Soto, *La «pintura mensaje» del Hermano Rafael* (Burgos: Monte Carmelo y Monasterio Cisterciense de San Isidro de Dueñas, 1989), 231.

## 118. Meditations of a Trappist

### “Viaticum”

La Trapa, July 27, 1936

Indeed, everything comes and goes. There is a brother in the infirmary who is dying . . . and has known it for a while.<sup>820</sup> We gave him Extreme Unction yesterday . . . If you're not used to seeing it, it's a somewhat moving experience.

Once we finish None in choir, Reverend Father Abbot goes to the sacristy, puts on his vestments, miter, and stole, and takes up the crosier.<sup>821</sup> From there, the procession begins. A priest carries the cross; another carries the holy oils; Reverend Father Abbot follows them, preceded by the crosier-bearer, which yesterday was me; and lastly, the master of ceremonies . . . the community follows behind in two lines, singing the penitential psalms.

We head for the sick brother's room. Our sick brother joyfully awaits the visit of the Lord, who will come to be with him, after Father Abbot anoints him with the holy oils . . .

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<sup>820</sup> Brother Gabriel Salevicens Amboz (1873–1936), a lay brother who worked in the laundry at San Isidro for many years (OC 654).

<sup>821</sup> The miter (a triangular headdress) and crosier (a pastoral staff) are symbols of authority most commonly associated with bishops, but also used by monastic abbots. Abbesses are also presented with a crosier upon being admitted to their office, though not the miter.

The community sings the psalms proper to the occasion as the ceremony proceeds. The bell rings from afar . . . for Viaticum . . . Christ is coming to visit our sick brother . . . Perhaps this is the last time he will receive Him sacramentally . . . The community prostrates themselves as the Lord passes by, and through the hands of his Father Abbot, the sick brother receives true Life and Health . . . What does the rest matter?

I don't know how to write about this . . . All I can do is roughly describe the external ceremony . . . the ceremony and the rubrics laid out in our Usages<sup>822</sup> . . . But when it comes to the spirit that animates the Trappists . . . the faith of the dying man, who no longer expects anything from this earth . . . the emotion in my soul as I realized that man's end is life's true beginning . . . I don't know how to put any of that into words . . . These things are so huge, and so personal . . . All I can say is that when you see how Trappists prepare to leave this world, your soul feels envy, and you wish you were dying . . .

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<sup>822</sup> The *Usages* of the Cistercian Order of the Strict Observance govern the daily life of the monastery, including liturgical practices as Rafael notes here. For the *Usages* in place at San Isidro during Rafael's time, see *Usos de la Orden de los Cistercienses de la Estrecha Observancia* . . . (Westmalle, Belgium: [General Chapter of 1926], 1928), available in English as *Regulations of the Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance Published by the General Chapter of 1926* (Dublin: M.H. Gill & Sons, 1927).



On the cover of this notebook, I have drawn a Trappist and a Cross.<sup>823</sup> The monk is kneeling at the foot of the Cross . . . And the Cross's shadow darkens his white habit. No comment or explanation needed, I think.

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<sup>823</sup> See Fig. 9, *Meditations* 108.

**119. Meditations of a Trappist**  
**“Not Knowing How to Cut Grass”**

La Trapa, July 29, 1936

Ave Maria

A pause in the morning's work. It's a bright day, but not a hot one, and a fresh breeze ripples through the greenery, bringing forth a whisper from the leaves of the trees. It is seven in the morning. A monk kisses the cross of the rosary he was praying on the way, and then he puts it back in the roomy pockets of his tunic. He crosses himself, and without further ado, he diligently gets to work cutting grass.

Silence . . . the only sound is the slash of the sickle as it cuts through the plants . . . from time to time, a rock goes flying . . . that Trappist doesn't know how to cut grass. An hour goes by.

At a distance, from the monastery tower, a bell rings eight times. A clap is heard, signaling a pause in the work period. The monk obeys, laying the sickle down, wiping the sweat from his brow, and sitting down at the edge of a pathway . . . He looks up at the sky and takes out his rosary. The sky is blue . . . very blue, very clear, not a cloud in it, flooded with light, and as the Trappist holds his rosary, he thinks about how Mary's mantle must be just like that . . . so clear, bright, and blue.

Everything exudes peace . . . It makes one want to die. How great God is! How wonderfully He does things! That poor Trappist loves God so much! . . . And God knows it.

The monk is still holding his rosary, but he hasn't gotten past the first bead . . .  
 Lost in thought about Mary's mantle covering the earth and everyone on it . . . the  
 Trappist got distracted and didn't pray at all . . . How sweet it is to think of Mary!

A clap rings out . . . How the time flies! He puts his rosary away again, crosses  
 himself, and picks the sickle back up. The meadow is full of sunlight, the sky is still blue  
 . . . just like the mantle of the Virgin who, from Her throne at God's side, is looking down  
 on Her son as he thinks of Her and hunches down over the grass to cut it . . .

All is peace, silence, and prayer in the Trappist's heart. All that can be heard is  
 the sound of the sickle as it cuts the grass, and the occasional rock goes flying . . . That  
 monk doesn't know how to cut grass . . . It doesn't matter. The Virgin looks down at him  
 and smiles at his clumsiness. The Virgin Mary is good that way.



Fig. 11<sup>824</sup>

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<sup>824</sup> Image source: Antonio Cobos Soto, *La «pintura mensaje» del Hermano Rafael*  
 (Burgos: Monte Carmelo y Monasterio Cisterciense de San Isidro de Dueñas, 1989), 229.

## 120. Meditations of a Trappist

### “The Sea in Fair Weather”

La Trapa, July 30, 1936

Ave Maria

The Cistercian life is a life of silence. It's no surprise, then, that the Cistercian monk should find inspiration for his meditation in silence, or rather, that silence should be the environment or place in which his spiritual life develops.

Silence is like a sea where all our thoughts are sailing. And just as all kinds of vessels plow through the sea, from little sailboats to proud, majestic ships, so too is the sea of our silence populated with little white-sailed schooners, or dirty fishing boats that spew out a ton of smoke, or sometimes, a passenger ship plowing serenely and majestically through the waters.

The life of silence is very much like a sea in fair weather with calm waters. A soul in silence is like a sea undisturbed by even the slightest breeze.

Thoughts of God sail around the silent soul; and with greater silence comes greater peace and serenity, and a greater capacity for remaining in the Lord's presence.

The Trappist loves his silence as a sailor loves the sea.

But not everything in this life is peace. A pilot must often struggle against stormy seas . . . The waters are not always still, and sometimes they grow weary of being calm, and they roar and foam with fury, beating against the shore as if it were the cause of its ill temper. Similarly, when souls are at rest in God, their peace will be disturbed when they break silence.

When the monk breaks his silence, without even meaning to, he speaks of the world, of his tastes and pleasures . . . of himself . . . The sea is troubled now . . . Oh, if only he would speak of God alone . . . but even so . . . it is so hard not to offend God with one's tongue.

Let us Cistercian monks be quiet, then . . . We came to the monastery in order to seek God in the silence of our souls . . . so let us be quiet, and not stir up the waters of our memories, our passions, our own self-love.

Let us be quiet, both when the divine Jesus has consoled us and when we are alone with our cross.

Let us be quiet, and keep our silence, for in it we shall find our treasure, if we know how to seek Him.

So, then, let us love silence, as a sailor loves the sea.

Let us distance ourselves from the shore . . . and put out into the deep<sup>825</sup> . . . When we can no longer see land, and the horizon blends into the sky, let us lift our eyes to the heights where God dwells; then, we shall see that our peace in this world grows in the same measure as our silence, and it shall be complete only when it is as great as the seas over all the earth.

The Virgin Mary, the Star who guides sailors, will guide us and give us light when we enter into the night of our solitude.

The life of a Cistercian monk is . . . love for God, love for Mary, and silence among men.

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<sup>825</sup> See Luke 5:4.

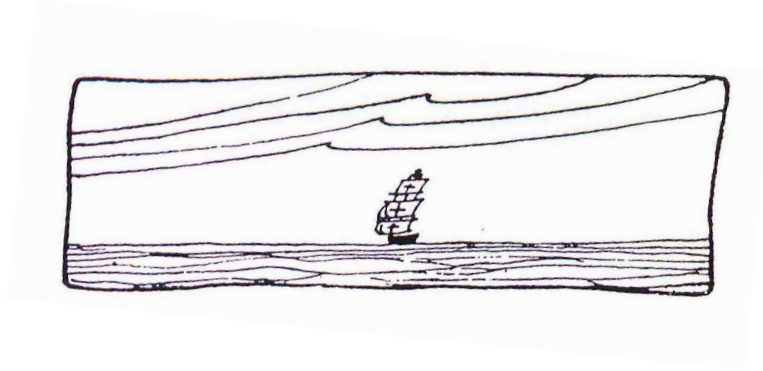


Fig. 12<sup>826</sup>

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<sup>826</sup> Image source: Antonio Cobos Soto, *La «pintura mensaje» del Hermano Rafael* (Burgos: Monte Carmelo y Monasterio Cisterciense de San Isidro de Dueñas, 1989), 229.

**121. Meditations of a Trappist**  
**“How Great Is the Mercy of God!”**

La Trapa, August 1, 1936

Ave Maria

How great is the mercy of God! The heart stretches as it contemplates divine mercy. Man is nothing . . . perhaps worse than nothing. His life on earth is of no importance, unfathomably so.

God is infinite . . . The human mind cannot comprehend His existence from all eternity.

Behold the two, man and God. Two different beings, infinitely so . . . It would be a sin of pride to even attempt to compare them . . . God, who exceeds the heavens, the mere idea of whom drives man’s soul mad; man . . . misery, sin, littleness . . . an invisible atom in space.

How great is the mercy of God!

The soul of this man, who approached God in communion today, cannot put that mercy into words. How great is the mercy of God!

The heart of this poor Trappist who, unable to understand it, stunned with admiration, had God within him today . . . doesn’t know what to say.

How great is the mercy of God! He repeats this exclamation slowly, but does not come to understand it . . . His soul loses itself in the greatness of the Creator, who deigns to come down among creatures . . .

In the mysterious, silent hours of the night, the Trappist meditates upon the mysteries of his religion . . . the mysteries of a God who, being God, became man, and not satisfied with that, hides Himself in the humility of a Tabernacle to be our consolation on this earth.

The monk also hides himself from the eyes of the world in order to be with his God, and in these tranquil hours spent in His presence, the Trappist finds that the austerity of his life is abundantly rewarded . . . In exchange for his monastic silence, sweet conversations with Jesus . . . for his sacrifice and crucifixion to the world, the treasures of supernatural graces.

“How great is the mercy of God!” he slowly repeats along the monastery cloisters, while dawn’s first light seeps in through the windows, little by little, announcing the sunrise . . . And the new day dawns as if answering the birds’ call, and as if the joy of the light were itself a response to the exclamation of that Trappist, whose heart never tires of singing the mercies and greatness of the absolute Master of all creation.

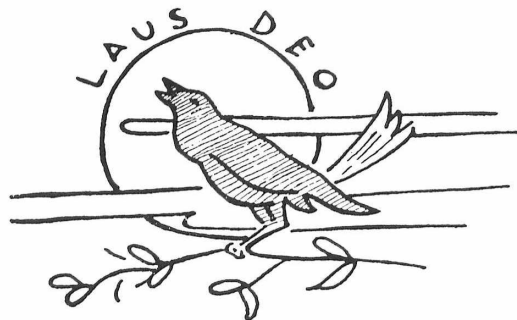


Fig. 13<sup>827</sup>

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<sup>827</sup> Text: “*Laus Deo*,” “praise be to God.” Image source: Antonio Cobos Soto, *La «pintura mensaje» del Hermano Rafael* (Burgos: Monte Carmelo y Monasterio Cisterciense de San Isidro de Dueñas, 1989), 235.



## 122. Meditations of a Trappist

### “The Tower Bells”

La Trapa, August 2, 1936

Ave Maria

It's two in the morning . . . A brother lights a candle in the chapel and another in the cloister. The community wakes up . . . The only sound to be heard is that of the monks' habits rustling as they hurry from the dormitories to chapel.

The choir fills up with white shadows who silently kneel in their places. The Trappist leaves sleep behind in order to praise God, who is waiting for him in the Tabernacle.

A few brief minutes go by. The last one has finally arrived . . . In every community there's a monk who arrives last . . . Someone has to, and the last monk is just as necessary as the first.

The clock repeats the hour . . . it's two o'clock. A brother rises from his place and slowly goes over to ring the tower bell. It is a solemn moment . . . Men inform heaven that they are about to begin chanting, and ask God to listen to them . . . Their first words will be for the Virgin Mary.

The tower bell rings out low . . . Its sound flows through the valley and over the fields, and jumps from star to star until it reaches Jesus and Mary in heaven. The bell's final toll has not yet come when, at the superior's signal, all the Trappists prostrate themselves, and their bowed foreheads nearly touch the ground. A voice is heard uttering

the first words said in the monastery, those that the angel spoke to the Virgin: *Ave Maria, gratia plena, Dominus tecum.*<sup>828</sup>

And the choir responds, *Benedicta tu in mulieribus et benedictus fructus ventris tui.*<sup>829</sup> And up in heaven, Mary hears them.

I believe that the humble prayer of that Trappist who lifts up his heart to God in the silence of the night while his eyes are still heavy with sleep must be pleasing to Mary.

And thus Matins begin in La Trapa, with the ring of a bell, prostration on the floor, and an appeal to the Virgin.



Fig. 14<sup>830</sup>

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<sup>828</sup> That is, “Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you.”

<sup>829</sup> “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.”

<sup>830</sup> Image source: Antonio Cobos Soto, *La «pintura mensaje» del Hermano Rafael* (Burgos: Monte Carmelo y Monasterio Cisterciense de San Isidro de Dueñas, 1989), 230.

## 123. Meditations of a Trappist

### “Spain Is at War”

La Trapa, August 2, 1936

J-H-S

We are in an age of revolution, a time of bloody war among brothers and sisters who belong to the same nation.

The news that reaches the monastery from the world has introduced a note of sadness into our conventual peace. Spain is at war. Our brothers and sisters out there in the world are killing each other. Some are God’s enemies, and others fight under the banner of Christ. All battle beneath the gaze of the King of the world . . . Everything was prepared by the Master and Lord of humanity. No one will go further than He allows them to.

Here in this Trappist monastery there are souls who are offering themselves to God for the sake of peace in Spain. These souls, at a distance from political battles, beg God for peace among brothers and sisters, victory for Christ’s followers, and forgiveness for God’s enemies.

Everything that Spain is going through is a test of divine mercy. Impiety reigned among evil people in broad daylight; apathy and lukewarmness overpowered good people; and immorality and paganism seeped in on all sides.

Spain needed to be shaken up . . . It needed to be made clean . . . It needed to react . . . It even needs martyrs to die for it. And God’s mercy is permitting a war to break out.

Perhaps entire cities will be destroyed. Perhaps Spaniards will die by the thousands . . . Perhaps this will be the material ruin of the nation. It won't matter . . . if as a result, Christians are purified of their sins, immorality is at least somewhat banished from their ways, and Spain is spiritually elevated.

God deals with the peoples as they deserve, and if He sends war and desolation to some in punishment for their sins, He scourges others with suffering to remind them that He exists, and to show them their own ingratitude, in order to shake them out of their indifference.

Spain, which has given so much glory to Christ's Church, a home to saints, a land that is exceptional for its Catholicism, is asleep. With this war, God is giving it a wake-up call. Will it respond?

The Trappists of Venta de Baños are praying to the Virgin Mary for Spain. May Our Lady of the Pillar of Zaragoza<sup>831</sup> turn Spain back to the faith . . . But if victory does not make us better people . . . then it would be preferable not to be victorious. If martyrs are needed, let there be martyrs; anything but continued offense to God. But that won't happen . . . the Virgin is watching over the Spanish people, and the Heart of Jesus will not abandon us.

Today, August 2, 1936, the whole community is keeping vigil before the Most Blessed Sacrament to pray for peace, to pray for those who are dying, to make reparation

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<sup>831</sup> The title of Our Lady of the Pillar (*La Virgen del Pilar*) refers to the apparition of Mary to Saint James while he was preaching in Zaragoza, now part of Spain and home to her major shrine.

for many sins, and so that He might conform us all to His divine will.<sup>832</sup> And God must hear us . . . because God is very good.

Of course, our fasting, prayer, and use of the discipline<sup>833</sup> is not enough . . . All that is a drop in the bucket . . . The death of every human being would not be enough to atone for a single mortal sin . . . an infinite offense against the Infinite One.

But we should not let despondency fester in our hearts . . . When we beg God for mercy and forgiveness, we do so as David did, *secundum multitudinem miserationum tuarum*.<sup>834</sup> That is, it is not on account of our own merits, but rather because of the abundance and greatness of His mercy, that He will remove our sins and those of the whole world. God is so great! Humanity has gone so mad!

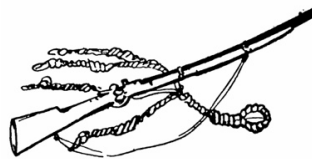


Fig. 15<sup>835</sup>

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<sup>832</sup> The Bishop of Palencia, now-Saint Manuel González García, in consultation with the abbot of San Isidro, Dom Félix Alonso García, had the community increase their penances and offer time spent in Adoration for the intention of a triumph over atheism and anticlericalism (OC 665–666).

<sup>833</sup> *Cilices and disciplines*: Instruments of physical penance (see Letter 40).

<sup>834</sup> *According to our abundant mercy* (Psalm 51:1).

<sup>835</sup> A rifle and a discipline (for the discipline, see Letter 40). Image source: Antonio Cobos Soto, *La «pintura mensaje» del Hermano Rafael* (Burgos: Monte Carmelo y Monasterio Cisterciense de San Isidro de Dueñas, 1989), 232.

## 124. Meditations of a Trappist

### “Life is a Struggle”

La Trapa, August 3, 1936

Ave Maria

Five o'clock in the morning. A Trappist has just received communion. What does he have to say? What is he thinking about? Perhaps his soul is in a daze . . . he has just done something so sublime . . . But no, unfortunately, although he'd like to go mad every time he receives his God, that's not what happens . . . He's still a man on earth, not an angel in heaven, and as such, what can be expected of him? *The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.*<sup>836</sup>

He bears with his body as God instructs him. His soul would like to fly unto realms of light, but his eyelids are heavy with sleep . . . they close . . . and they remind him that life is a struggle, and a struggle against darkness.

It is truly a humiliation to have to live. It is truly a humiliation to be subject to the body, which so often conquers us, and which we could not do without, even if we wanted to.

It is truly a humiliation not to be able to receive God somewhere else. Rather, it must be here, within us, within our misery, within our souls bound to physical form . . . to a physical form that holds us back, as when our eyelids, heavy with sleep, want to close .

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<sup>836</sup> Matt 26:41.

Lord Jesus, forgive that poor Trappist oblate . . . Don't measure his love for You by what he does or says to You, because he often fails to say or do anything. His will is different from his actions. His soul is merely able to recognize that it deserves nothing. If you, Lord, were to put us under scrutiny, who could withstand it?<sup>837</sup>

That poor Cistercian oblate, who falls asleep in choir without meaning to . . . That poor little brother, who wants to fly, but finds himself with cut wings, bound to his body and its miseries.

Let it be enough for you to walk in the humble way that the Lord has marked out for you, and may your very weaknesses help you to learn to love God . . . who loves you just as you are, frail and weak, eyelids heavy with sleep.

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<sup>837</sup> Rafael's paraphrase of Ps 130:3, *If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities, Lord, who could stand?*

## 125. Meditations of a Trappist

### “Tying Sheaves”

La Trapa, August 3, 1936

Today we went out to tie sheaves of wheat . . . It was fairly hot out, and our work location was a few kilometers from the monastery.

It’s one thing to eat bread . . . and another thing entirely to trudge through wheatfields in August . . . Our habits are so thick! . . . If we were in white pants and shirts then maybe it would be all right . . . that is, in the shade, cooling off with a drink.

All that nonsense about the “sun” . . . and the “fields of golden grain” . . . and the “humble reaper,” etc.<sup>838</sup> . . . etc. . . . It’s lovely when Gabriel y Galán<sup>839</sup> is writing poems about it, to be read under the shade of a thick black poplar . . .

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<sup>838</sup> The “fields of golden grain” and “humble reaper” are tropes of pastoral poetry.

Despite citing a different poet, Rafael appears to be drawing specifically from neoclassical poet Juan Meléndez Valdés (1754–1817), whose pastoral romance “The Reapers” includes the following chorus: “Reapers, to the fields of grain! / For the golden morning / has already opened her rosy gates / to the sun rising from the east” (Juan Meléndez Valdés, “Romance XV: Los segadores,” in *Poesías* vol. 2 [Madrid: Imprenta Real, 1820], 70–71).

<sup>839</sup> José María Gabriel y Galán (1870–1905) was a Spanish poet whose works are known for their pastoral themes and Catholic perspective.



But enough . . . enough already with the “fields of golden grain.” Still, it’s a good thing that this business of wheat and sheaves is all very biblical<sup>840</sup> . . . and it’s always a consolation.

Of course, this sweaty, dusty Trappist isn’t complaining . . . Quite the contrary, he thanks the Lord profusely, and offers Him these little tasks . . . At the end of the day, he is merely complying with the law imposed upon him, and he does so with joy and true peace.

On the other hand, he is so grateful when it’s time to return to the monastery . . . to the house of God, who awaits us in the Tabernacle, where we will tell Him all about what we just finished doing outside . . .

Everything passes, cold and heat, and the day is coming when our work will be finished . . . In heaven, there’s no need to tie sheaves . . . because there isn’t any wheat up there.



Fig. 16<sup>841</sup>

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<sup>840</sup> The motif of sheaves of wheat is prominent throughout the Bible; see e.g. Genesis 37, Leviticus 23, Ruth 2, Psalms 126 and 129, and Matthew 13.

<sup>841</sup> Image source: Antonio Cobos Soto, *La «pintura mensaje» del Hermano Rafael* (Burgos: Monte Carmelo y Monasterio Cisterciense de San Isidro de Dueñas, 1989), 236.

## 126. Meditations of a Trappist

### “No News from the World”

La Trapa, August 4, 1936

Ave Maria

We still don't have any news from the world . . . How faraway that word sounds, “the world” . . . What, are we Trappists no longer part of it? Yes, we are, but thanks be to God, our cloister protects us from its many spiritual dangers. We live in the world, but at a great distance from it.

But now, Spain being in the condition it's in, we Spanish monks cannot remain unaffected . . . If we have no desire to learn anything about the world when it's happy and enjoying itself . . . now that it's suffering and there's a war on, we want to know everything and help everyone . . . Monks are not so selfish as people think.

Nevertheless, we don't know anything . . . for better or for worse. We just keep praying to God for the sake of our beloved country.

## 127. Meditations of a Trappist

### “On Our Way to Work”<sup>842</sup>

La Trapa, August 5, 1936

Ave Maria

In just a few minutes, it'll be six-thirty in the morning . . . One must make the most of one's time. A Trappist oblate's first duty is to Mary . . . So he turns to Her, and kneels before Her altar for the few moments at his disposal before the Rule sends him off to work.

At the altar, he venerates the Immaculate . . . She has a little chapel next to the main altar, and is very often visited by those devoted to the Virgin. He kneels upon the first steps and gazes up at the statue, which looks back at Her son from Her little alcove.

“Our Lady, I'm off to work . . . come with me,” he says to her . . . “Our Lady, help me . . . help me morally and physically. May my work be acceptable to God . . . Accompany me as I leave the monastery. Don't abandon your poor oblate at this moment, which may be when he needs you the most . . .”

On the steps of the altar, the man keeps praying to Mary . . . and I think that up in heaven, the Virgin is listening to him . . . listening, and looking after him.

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<sup>842</sup> This title is Rafael's (see *Meditations* 108).

It's time to go to work . . . a *Salve*, a bit of holy water for the sign of the cross, and then we're quickly off to the speaking room.<sup>843</sup> There, we put on our black-and-white-striped aprons, and wait silently in a line for the superior to tell us what our task is.

Father Master arrives. One by one, he tells us our tasks . . . Today, we're off to the fields. We put on our straw hats and our clogs . . . Those are heavy, and pretty hard. Mine are fairly big. I call them my "luggage."

The monastery's iron gate opens, and a line of Trappists heads out to work in the fields. Father Master leads them, while Father Submaster follows behind the group, or in his absence, the most senior novice.<sup>844</sup> The only sound to be heard is that of our clogs, scraping against stones with their thick nails as we walk.

Man is observing one of God's laws . . . work . . . A punishment imposed because of the fall of Adam,<sup>845</sup> a punishment that many rebel against, and in doing so, offend God . . . But for the Trappist, everything is made gentle and pleasant because he relies on heaven's aid . . . which never fails.

No matter how hard the day's work may be, God is the one who directs it . . . and the Virgin is the one who helps, encourages, and consoles us.

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<sup>843</sup> *Speaking room*: A designated room in a monastery where speech is permitted. At San Isidro, the speaking room was used for brief audiences with superiors and for the daily distribution of work (OC 671).

<sup>844</sup> *Father Master*: Fr. José Olmedo Arrieta (see Letter 95). *Father Submaster*: Fr. Francisco Díez Martínez (see Letter 48).

<sup>845</sup> See Genesis 3:17,19.

Of course work is a punishment, but when you truly love the one who imposed it . . . when you see the mercy of the one who is punishing us . . . then you come to see that work is necessary. When the Lord provides for us the means to obey this law on earth, He distinguishes us as His favorite children. Besides, as Saint Francis de Sales says, “Let us make a virtue of necessity.”<sup>846</sup>

So, there is nothing to fear from working in the fields . . . Let us have compunction for our sins and faults, and let us love the difficult penance that God asks of us . . . and thus, with a rosary in one hand, a hoe in the other, and our hearts fixed on Christ, the line of Trappists goes forth to obey what Saint Benedict laid out for us in our Rule . . . manual labor.

Among them . . . rather, the last among them, is an oblate . . . a soul who wants to become holy, and who also, as a Trappist, wants to offer to God a heart and soul redeemed through work.

The caravan of penitents advances slowly through the Castilian countryside. In heaven, the angels and saints rejoice to see that there are still those on earth who are fighting, suffering, and working for love of Christ.

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<sup>846</sup> While Rafael attributes this now-common saying to Saint Francis de Sales, it can be found (as *faciat de necessitate virtutem*) in Saint Peter Chrysologus as well as Saint Jerome. See Peter Chrysologus, *Selected Sermons* vol. 2, trans. William B. Palardy (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2004), 171 and Jerome, *Dogmatic and Polemical Works* trans. John N. Hritz (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1965), 164.



Fig. 17<sup>847</sup>

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<sup>847</sup> Image source: Antonio Cobos Soto, *La «pintura mensaje» del Hermano Rafael*

(Burgos: Monte Carmelo y Monasterio Cisterciense de San Isidro de Dueñas, 1989), 232.

**128. Meditations of a Trappist**  
**“You Don’t Just Come and Conquer”**

La Trapa, August 5, 1936

Ave Maria

Unfortunately, in the religious life, it’s not all devotion . . . People change seven times a day, and anything can make them waver . . . At the end of the day, people are people; creatures with bodies and souls, and therefore, with struggles in which the spirit does not always have the upper hand. God, in His mercy, permits this, so that we might not boast about ourselves, but learn to humble ourselves as we realize how little we are and turn to Him in everything.

It’s true, the Trappist lives more for heaven than earth, but he is still on earth. As long as he is walking through this valley of tears,<sup>848</sup> he has to keep his spirits up so that he doesn’t lose heart. Often, that means *doing violence to himself*, and in that he is joyfully obeying another law of Christ, who imposed it upon us that we might gain the kingdom of God.<sup>849</sup>

No . . . the monk’s life is not all peace and sweetness. Our souls are not always in the heights of consolation in prayer, or even in contemplation . . . Sometimes the old self

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<sup>848</sup> See the *Salve Regina*: “To thee do we send up our sighs, mourning and weeping in this valley of tears.”

<sup>849</sup> *From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force* (Mt 11:12).

reawakens and wages war on us.<sup>850</sup> Our past life with all its memories . . . we can't forget a single blow, even if we want to.

You don't just come and conquer . . . The eternal life for which the soul yearns day in and day out cannot be earned except through surrender, sacrifice, and embracing the cross of Christ . . . That is the only way . . . That is the way followed by religious. Hope keeps them going; faith guides them; and love is their light . . .

But when God allows faith to darken, and hope to be lost, and love to grow weak, oh! in that moment . . . when the soul is all alone with its cross, surrounded by darkness, plagued by its own misery and weakness . . . oh! in that moment, one comes to understand the martyrdom of religious life . . . That is when God tries souls, and when heaven's aid and Mary's protection are needed.

How easy it is to love God in consolation, when everything smiles upon us, and our spirits seem to fly . . . ! But those who truly love God don't need any of that. Joy and suffering are all the same to them, and they love God when they are flooded with sunlight just as much as when they are drowning in darkness.

How necessary are the peaks and valleys of spiritual life . . . How great is the mercy of God, who permits even the weaknesses and imperfections of His most beloved children, so that we might come to understand what we are.

Let us keep fighting day after day, without losing heart, whether our souls are ecstatic with love or in the sad human condition of dragging on the ground.

Onward, all for Jesus and always through Mary!!

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<sup>850</sup> See Ephesians 4:22–24.



## 129. Meditations of a Trappist

### “The Pears in the Grove”

La Trapa, August 6, 1936

Ave Maria

Today, Father Master ordered me to gather up the straw and ears of wheat left over on the ground at our work site once the sheaves have been tied.

You do this with a long rake. I don't know what it's called, but it doesn't matter. Armed, then, with my work instrument, I distanced myself from the other novices and went where I'd been told to go.

On my right is wheat that hasn't been reaped yet, crossed by a road, covered in brick-red dust. On my left is a grove full of trees and tall grass, with a great deal of shade and many birds. And above me is the blue sky, which is very clear, not a cloud in it. In my hands, I have the rake, which I use to gather up ears of wheat scattered across the uneven ground.

There's nobody around . . . An absolute silence reigns at this hour in the countryside, interrupted only by a nightingale singing in the grove, while the other birds serve as its choir . . . I start singing too . . . Nobody can hear me here . . . My work is simple and it doesn't wear me out . . . It doesn't require much effort to rake up stray ears.

Amid all this, I hear the faraway footsteps of a little donkey . . . and I fall silent.

Coming down the road covered in brick-colored dust, there is a good woman wearing a kerchief on her head, carrying a basket, and riding elegantly on the donkey, whose quick little steps make a joyful click-clack . . .

The woman sees me, and as she passes by, she hollers out a thunderous “good morning,” perhaps stretching out the “o” in morning too long. And since I can’t speak, I thank her for her greeting by raising my hand up to the brim of my hat and doing a very strange gesture with my fingers . . .

It was hot out . . . The sun was doing what the Lord asks it to do in August, which is beat down . . . and today, it was doing that quite well.

The good woman was already a good distance away when she stopped her ride, turned back toward me, and shouted, “If you go down into the grove, my husband will give you a pear” . . . I raised my arm to her once again, and with a joyful click-clack from the little donkey as it stomped along the brick-red road, the charitable woman went away . . .

I looked at the dust rising up . . . then I looked over at the grove where her husband was, and therefore, the pears . . . and lastly, I looked up at the sky, which was still very blue and clear, and I kept gathering up the ears scattered on the ground with my long rake.

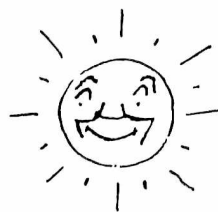


Fig. 18<sup>851</sup>

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<sup>851</sup> Image source: Antonio Cobos Soto, *La «pintura mensaje» del Hermano Rafael* (Burgos: Monte Carmelo y Monasterio Cisterciense de San Isidro de Dueñas, 1989), 236.

### 130. Meditations of a Trappist

#### “You Alone”

La Trapa, August 8, 1936

Ave Maria

God . . . He is the one thing that keeps me going, the only reason for my monastic life . . . For me, God is everything, He is in everything, and I see Him in everything. What interest can creatures hold for me? What interest can I hold for myself? Dwelling on myself just makes me crazy, and it's vanity to busy yourself with things other than God. And nevertheless, how easy it is to forget our true reason for living, and how often we live without any reason at all.

Every minute, hour, day, and year that we have not spent living for God is time wasted.

One can understand and explain why people forget about God in the world, and focus only on living this mortal life well . . . after all, the world is God's enemy. Enough said. But in our life of solitude and silence, we often waste time . . . it is truly a shame, and nevertheless, that's often how it is.

Lord, my God, what do I care for anything that isn't You? What do I get out of focusing on creatures so much? What am I, that I should look at myself so much? Truly, it's all vanity. You alone should occupy my life. You alone should fill my heart . . . You alone should be my only thought.

God, the only reason to live, to exist . . . God should reign over even the air we breathe, the light shed upon us. God, who is the beginning, middle, and end of all things,

ought to be all the more so for a Trappist monk . . . who dwells in the house of God, who lives only to praise Him, and who remains in His presence day and night.

He is in everything . . . in choir, in the fields, in our work, He is there when we eat and when we sleep . . . It's all the same, because it all reminds us why we came to the monastery, which was to seek Him in austerity, in silence, in chapel, and in the garden, to seek Him inside ourselves as well as outside.

We should see the Creator in everything that surrounds us, whether it is beautiful and pleasant or ugly and repulsive . . . It is all His work. There is nothing useless under the sun. The times when our souls are flooded with God's light, and it seems like everything is smiling upon us, are just as necessary as when the darkness of desolation overpowers us, and the cloudy skies weigh down on us as if to crush us.

It is a matter of seeing God in everything . . . and not wasting a minute of our lives, not believing that fervor is a sign that everything is going well and that when we lack it God is far away from us . . . May the Virgin free us from that mistake.

May we Trappists be persuaded of the fact that God is with us at every moment . . . May we be rid of any impression that deludes our senses . . . Let's go beyond ourselves, let's get rid of that ego that does us so much harm, and throw ourselves into God's arms, just as we are, with our weaknesses and our virtues, our sins and our miseries. Let us put our souls against His bosom, both when they are laughing and when they are crying. If we truly do this, and we make our lives entirely for Him, and make Him our everything, we will have obtained true peace of heart, we will be closer to heaven than earth, and then . . . what will you care, Brother Rafael, if it's rainy or sunny?



Fig. 19<sup>852</sup>



Fig. 20<sup>853</sup>

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<sup>852</sup> Text: “God alone suffices” (“*solo Dios basta*”), from a poem by Saint Teresa of Ávila (see Dedication 107). Image source: Antonio Cobos Soto, *La «pintura mensaje» del Hermano Rafael* (Burgos: Monte Carmelo y Monasterio Cisterciense de San Isidro de Dueñas, 1989), 238.

<sup>853</sup> This drawing was done on the inside back cover of the notebook, serving as a conclusion to *Meditations of a Trappist* (see Juan Antonio Martínez Camino, *Mi Rafael* [Bilbao: Desclée de Brouwer, 2003], 242–244). Image source: Antonio Cobos Soto, *La «pintura mensaje» del Hermano Rafael* (Burgos: Monte Carmelo y Monasterio Cisterciense de San Isidro de Dueñas, 1989), 232.

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### Appendix I: Chronology of the Life of Saint Rafael Arnáiz Barón

1911	April 9	Rafael is born in Burgos.
	April 21	Rafael is baptized at the Church of Saint Agatha ( <i>Santa Águeda</i> ), Burgos.
1913	December 1	Rafael receives the Sacrament of Confirmation at the School of the Child Jesus ( <i>Colegio del Niño Jesús</i> ), Burgos.
1919	October 25	Rafael receives First Communion at the Monastery of the Visitation ( <i>Monasterio de la Visitación</i> ), Burgos.
1922		Rafael's family moves from Burgos to Oviedo.
1930	September 30	Rafael makes his first visit to the Cistercian Monastery of San Isidro de Dueñas (La Trapa).
1932	July 17–26	Rafael makes a retreat at La Trapa.
1930	September 17	Rafael moves from Oviedo to Madrid to begin studies at the Higher Technical School of Architecture of Madrid ( <i>Escuela Técnica Superior de Arquitectura de Madrid</i> ).
1933	January 25	Rafael completes his obligatory military service in the Corps of Engineers.
1934	January 16	<b>Rafael is received into the novitiate at La Trapa.</b>
	May 26	Due to grave illness from diabetes, Rafael is forced to leave the monastery and moves back in with his parents in Oviedo to recuperate.
1936	January 11	<b>Rafael re-enters La Trapa as an oblate.</b>

	September 29	Along with other oblates, novices, and monks of military age, Rafael is forced to leave the monastery to report for military service during the Spanish Civil War.
	<b>December 6</b>	<b>Having been found medically unfit to serve, Rafael returns to La Trapa.</b>
<b>1937</b>	February 7	Rafael is once more sent away from the monastery to treat his severe diabetes. He moves in with his family, now living in more remote quarters in Villasandino outside Madrid.
	<b>December 15</b>	<b>Rafael returns to La Trapa for the last time.</b>
<b>1938</b>	April 26	Rafael dies from diabetes.
<b>1960</b>		The Monastery of San Isidro de Dueñas begins the process for Rafael's beatification.
<b>1983</b>	January 15	After a thorough examination of his life and writings, Rafael is declared a Servant of God.
<b>1989</b>	September 7	Rafael is declared Venerable by Pope John Paul II.
<b>1992</b>	September 27	Rafael is beatified by Pope John Paul II in St. Peter's Square.
<b>2009</b>	October 11	Rafael is canonized by Pope Benedict XVI in St. Peter's Square.

## Appendix II: Glossary of Common Terms

**Breviary:** The physical book used to pray the *Liturgy of the Hours*.

**Choir monks:** Prior to 1965, Trappist monasteries included three classes of community members: *choir monks*, who were vowed and ordained priests primarily dedicated to prayer in choir; *lay brothers*, who took monastic vows but were not ordained, dedicated more time to work, and had fewer obligations in choir; and *oblates*, who neither are ordained nor do they take monastic vows.

**Cilice:** A spiked metal garter worn on the arm or leg as an instrument of physical penance.

**Cistercian:** The Order of Cistercians was founded in 1098 at Cîteaux, France, and follows the *Rule of Saint Benedict*.

**Consolation:** A term used by Saint Ignatius of Loyola to identify interior movements of the soul toward God, such as moments of love for God and sorrow for sin. He also identifies as consolation “every increase of hope, faith and charity, and all interior joy which calls and attracts to heavenly things and to the salvation of one's soul, quieting it and giving it peace in its Creator and Lord.”<sup>854</sup> Its opposite is *desolation*.

**Constitutions:** “The meaning of the word ‘constitutions’: a rule is the norm of living by which the monk attains to his end, union with God. Constitutions are particular

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<sup>854</sup> “Rules for the Discernment of Spirits.” Saint Ignatius of Loyola, *The Spiritual Exercises*, trans. Elder Mullan (Santa Cruz, CA: Internet Sacred Text Archive/Evinity Publishing, 2009), <https://sacred-texts.com/chr/seil/seil78.htm>.



statutes, added to the *Rule*, approved by the Holy See. . . . The *Constitutions* interpret and apply the *Rule* to our way of life” (Thomas Merton, *Charter, Customs, and Constitutions of the Cistercians: Initiation into the Monastic Tradition* 7, ed. Patrick F. O’Connell [Collegeville, MN: Cistercian Publications, 2015], 57). San Isidro de Dueñas was governed by the 1924 *Constitutions*, translated into English as *Constitutions of the Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance* (Dublin: M.H. Gill & Sons, 1925).

**Desolation:** A term used by Saint Ignatius of Loyola to identify interior movements of the soul that are contrary to *consolation*, such as “darkness of soul, disturbance in it, movement to things low and earthly, the unquiet of different agitations and temptations, moving to want of confidence, without hope, without love, when one finds oneself all lazy, tepid, sad, and as if separated from his Creator and Lord.”<sup>855</sup>

**Discipline:** A small whip made of rope, used as an instrument of physical penance.

**(Divine) Office:** Another name for the *Liturgy of the Hours*.

**Dryness:** A difficulty in contemplative prayer defined by the Catechism of the Catholic Church as “when the heart is separated from God, with no taste for thoughts, memories, and feelings, even spiritual ones. This is the moment of sheer faith clinging faithfully to Jesus in his agony and in his tomb.”<sup>856</sup>

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<sup>855</sup> Ibid.

<sup>856</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2003), §2731. [https://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc\\_css/archive/catechism/p4s1c3a2.htm](https://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p4s1c3a2.htm).

**Holy card:** A small picture, usually of Jesus, Mary, a Biblical scene, or a saint, produced for devotional use. Some holy cards come with prayers printed on the back, while others are left blank so that a handwritten message can be added.

**Lay brothers:** Unordained but vowed members of the monastery whose role emphasizes work. See *choir monks*.

**Little Office (of the Blessed Virgin Mary):** A devotion to Mary that shares the structure of the monastic hours. Before the Second Vatican Council, it was often said as an addition to the Divine Office among religious, or as a replacement for it among laity.

**Liturgy of the Hours:** The prayer of the whole Church, structured around the psalms and offered at set times, or Hours, throughout the day. The canonical Hours include *Vigils, Lauds, Prime, Terce, Sext, None, Vespers, and Compline* (see RB 16 and 17); for the schedule at San Isidro, see Letter 29. The Liturgy of the Hours is also known as the *Divine Office*, and the physical book used to pray it is known as the *breviary*.

**Interval:** In the monastic schedule, any time not officially assigned to work or prayer is referred to as an “interval.” Monks and nuns may use this “free time” as they see fit.

**Oblates:** “The oblate is a member of the community where he is received, without being canonically a member of the Order. [. . .] The oblature has the character of a promise of mutual fidelity on the part of the oblate and on the part of the community, and it does not of itself imply any vow. However, the oblate leads the monastic life according to the spirit of the vows of obedience, conversion of

manners and stability. This mutual agreement is revocable on either side, but only for serious reasons.”<sup>857</sup> See *choir monks*.

**Recollection:** A type of prayer taught by Saint Teresa of Ávila, who writes: “This prayer is called ‘recollection,’ because the soul collects its faculties together and enters within itself to be with its God.”<sup>858</sup>

**Rule (of St. Benedict):** A model for living in monastic community written by Saint Benedict of Nursia in the sixth century. The *Trappists*, like all *Cistercians*, follow the Rule of St. Benedict. In this edition, references to the Rule will use the abbreviation RB and cite the following edition: *RB 1980: The Rule of Saint Benedict in English*, ed. Timothy Fry (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2019).

**Salve Regina:** The “*Salve Regina*,” or “Hail Holy Queen,” is a hymn to Mary. It is regularly sung after *Compline*, or Night Prayer, in Cistercian houses.

**(La) Trapa:** Refers throughout to the Cistercian Abbey of San Isidro (*Abadía Cisterciense de San Isidro*) in Dueñas, Palencia, Spain. Its popular nickname of “La Trapa” originates from the Monastery of La Trappe in France; from that

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<sup>857</sup> *Constitutions and Statutes of the Monks and Nuns of the Cistercian Order of the Strict Observance and Other Legislative Documents* (Rome: Cistercian Order of the Strict Observance, 1990), 39.

<sup>858</sup> “Chapter 28: On the nature of the prayer of recollection.” Saint Teresa of Ávila, *The Way of Perfection*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 2013), 300.

monastery emerged the Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance, better known as the *Trappists*, to which the monks at San Isidro belong.

**Trappists:** Another name for the *Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance*, founded in 1664 at La Trappe, France. As its name indicates, the Order is a reform of the *Cistercian* monastic tradition founded in 1098 at Cîteaux, France.

**Usages:** The *Usages* of the Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance governed the daily life at San Isidro, providing more specific guidelines for liturgical practices, for example. The *Usages* can be understood as outlining the customs of the Order, as compared with the more broad and essential *Rule* and *Constitutions*. For the *Usages* in place at San Isidro during Rafael's time, see *Regulations of the Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance Published by the General Chapter of 1926* (Dublin: M.H. Gill & Sons, 1927).

**Visit:** Rafael refers to his daily hour of Eucharistic Adoration as his "Visit," sometimes his "Visit with the Master" or "Visit with the Lord."

### Appendix III: List of Correspondents

#### Family

Rafael Arnáiz Sánchez de la Campa	Rafael's father
Mercedes Barón Torres	Rafael's mother
Luis Fernando Arnáiz Barón	Rafael's brother, addressed as "Fernando"
Leopoldo Arnáiz Barón	Rafael's brother
Mercedes Arnáiz Barón	Rafael's sister, addressed as "Merceditas"
Leopoldo Barón	Rafael's maternal uncle, who lived in Ávila; addressed as "Uncle Polín" and "Brother Bernardo"; Duke of Maqueda by marriage
María Osorio	Rafael's aunt, married to Leopoldo Barón; sometimes addressed as Rafael's "sister"; Duchess of Maqueda
Dolores Barón Osorio	Rafael's cousin, Leopoldo and María's daughter
Fernanda Torres	Rafael's maternal grandmother, who lived in Toro
Leopoldo Torres	Rafael's maternal great-uncle, Fernanda's brother; known by his title, Marquess of San Miguel de Grox

**Friends**

Toribio Luis (Br. Tescelino) Arribas	As “Br. Tescelino,” second infirmarian at San Isidro; left in 1937 for military service, reverting to his baptismal name “Luis”
Rosa Calvo	Rafael’s friend, who worked at the lottery in Toro; addressed as “Aunt Ropi”
W. Marino del Hierro	an acquaintance of Br. Tescelino

**Monks of San Isidro de Dueñas**

Dom Félix Alonso García	Abbot, sometimes addressed as “Reverend Father” or “Father Abbot”
Fr. Marcelo León	Master of novices when Rafael was first accepted to the monastery; addressed as “Father Master”
Fr. José Olmedo	Master of novices as of July 1935; also addressed as “Father Master”
Fr. Francisco Díez	Sub-master of novices; addressed as “Father Sub-Master”
Fr. Buenaventura Ramos	Porter
Fr. Vicente Pardo	Infirmarian
Br. Damián Yáñez	Rafael’s co-novice
Br. Ramón Vallaura	the younger brother of Rafael’s closest friend, Juan Vallaura
Br. Jesús Sandoval	An oblate

**Appendix IV: List of Images**

Fig. i: *Ex Libris Arnáiz* (Copyright Page).

Fig. 1: Rafael with the stained-glass windows he painted at Pedrosillo (Letter 2).

Fig. 2: A drawing of a monk sitting at a desk and writing (Letter 30).

Fig. 3: “I will not gather flowers, / nor fear wild beasts; / I will go beyond strong men and frontiers” (Dedication 83).

Fig. 4: Two Christmas sketches (Letter 87).

Fig. 5: “Knowing how to wait” (“*Saber esperar*”), for Leopoldo Barón (Letter 87).

Fig. 6: Saint Francis of Assisi (Letter 94).

Fig. 7: Landscape of the monastery (Letter 127).

Fig. 8: Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, 1936 (Letter 127).

Fig. 9: *Meditations of a Trappist* (*Meditations* 108).

Fig. 10: “Why would God create flies?” (*Meditations* 117).

Fig. 11: A meadow outside the monastery (*Meditations* 119).

Fig. 12: A ship in fair weather (*Meditations* 120).

Fig. 13: A bird singing “*Laus Deo*,” “praise be to God” (*Meditations* 121).

Fig. 14: The tower bell (*Meditations* 122).

Fig. 15: A rifle and a discipline (*Meditations* 123).

Fig. 16: Stalks of wheat (*Meditations* 125).

Fig. 17: A monk at work (*Meditations* 127).

Fig. 18: A smiling sun (*Meditations* 129).

Fig. 19: “God alone suffices” (*Meditations* 130).

Fig. 20: A monk from behind (*Meditations* 130).

**Appendix V: Map of Rafael's Spain**

