

SPIRITUAL SAYINGS ATTRIBUTED TO SAINT JOHN OF THE CROSS¹

By virtue of the command which has been given to me, says Father Fray Eliseo de los Mártires,² I make the following declaration: I knew our father Fray John of the Cross and had to do with him on many and diverse occasions. He was a man of medium height, with a serious and venerable expression, somewhat swarthy and with good features; his demeanour and conversation were tranquil, very spiritual and of great profit to those who heard him and had to do with him. And in this respect he was so singular and so effective that those who knew him, whether men or women, left his presence with greater spirituality, devotion and affection for virtue. He had a deep knowledge and a keen perception of prayer and communion with God, and all the questions that were put to him concerning these matters he answered with the highest wisdom, leaving those who consulted him about them entirely satisfied and greatly advantaged. He was fond of recollection and given to speaking little; he seldom laughed and when he did so it was with great restraint. When he reproved others as their Superior (which happened frequently) he did so with a gracious severity, exhorting them with brotherly love, and acting throughout with a wondrous serenity and gravity.

FIRST SAYING.—He greatly objected to imperious commands being given by superiors to their religious, especially in the Reformed Orders, and was wont to say that nothing shows a man to be so unworthy of commanding others as the fact that he commands them imperiously; we should rather endeavour to bring it about that those under us never leave our presence downcast.

He never spoke with duplicity or artifice, to which he took the strongest objection, for he said:

¹ This document was first published by P. Gerardo, whose version has been collated with N.L.M. MS. 13,245, fols. 248–51. Another copy, differing slightly from this, is in the possession of the Carmelite friars of Segovia. Preference is here given to the N.L.M. copy.

² Fray Eliseo de los Mártires (1550–1620), an Extremaduran, was professed at Granada and came into contact with St. John of the Cross on several occasions. Later, he became one of the principal Fathers of the Reform in Mexico.

SECOND SAYING.—That artifice violated the sincerity and purity of the Order, and that many did it grievous harm by inculcating methods of prudence of a human kind which caused souls spiritual sickness.

THIRD SAYING.—He said concerning the vice of ambition that in reformed communities it is almost incurable, being the most infectious of all vices; it colours and taints the rule and conduct of the Order with appearances of virtue and of the greatest perfection, so that warfare with evil becomes sterner and spiritual sickness more incurable. And he said that this vice is so powerful and pestilent as to make such sinners of those who suffer from it that the devil is able to throw their lives into confusion and entanglement and thus to confound their confessors. He had great perseverance in prayer and in the practice of the presence of God and in anagogical movements and acts and ejaculatory prayers.

FOURTH SAYING.—He said that the entire life of a religious is (or ought to be) a doctrinal sermon, with these words, which should be repeated several times a day, for its text: Die and perish¹ rather than sin. He said that these words, if they spring from the will, cleanse and purify the soul and make it to grow in the love of God, in grief at having offended Him and in firmness of purpose to offend Him no more.

FIFTH SAYING.—He said that there are two ways of resisting vices and acquiring virtues. The one is common and the less perfect, which is when you endeavour to resist some vice, sin or temptation by means of the acts of virtue which conflict with this vice, sin or temptation and destroy it. If, for example, I am conscious of the vice or temptation of impatience or of the spirit of vengeance in my soul because of some harm which I have received or some insulting words, I then resist it by means of some good meditation, such as that on the Passion of the Lord (*qui cum male tractaretur, non aperuit os suum*); or by means of meditation upon the blessings which are acquired by suffering and of the conquest of a man by himself; or by thinking that God commanded that we should suffer, since suffering brings us profit, etc. By means of such meditations I am moved to suffer, accept and desire such insults, affronts or evils as this, to the glory and honour of God. This manner of resisting and fighting such temptation, vice or sin begets the virtue of patience, and it is a good method of resistance, though difficult and less perfect.

¹ [Sp., *morir y reventar*: 'die and burst.']

There is another way of conquering vices and temptations and acquiring and gaining virtues, which is easier, more profitable and more perfect. According to this, by its loving anagogical movements and acts alone, without any other exercises whatsoever, the soul resists and destroys all the temptations of our adversary and attains virtues in the most perfect degree. This, the venerable Father was wont to say, becomes possible after this manner. When we feel the first movement or attack of any vice, such as lust, wrath, impatience or a revengeful spirit when some wrong has been done to us, we should not resist it by making an act of the contrary virtue, in the way that has been described, but, as soon as we are conscious of it, we should meet it with an act or movement of anagogical love directed against this vice, and should raise our affection to union with God, for by this means the soul absents itself from its surroundings and is present with its God and becomes united with Him, and then the vice or the temptation and the enemy are defrauded of their intent, and have nowhere to strike; for the soul, being where it loves rather than where it lives, has met the temptation with Divine aid, and the enemy has found nowhere to strike and nothing whereon to lay hold, for the soul is no longer where the temptation or enemy would have struck and wounded it. And then, oh, marvellous thing! the soul, having forgotten this movement of vice, and being united and made one with its Beloved, no longer feels any movement of this vice wherewith the devil desired to tempt it, and was succeeding in doing so; in the first place, because, as has been said, it has escaped, and is no longer present, so that, if it may be put in this way, the devil is as it were tempting a dead body and doing battle with something that is not, feels not and is for the time being incapable of feeling temptation.

In this way there is begotten in the soul a wondrous and heroic virtue, which the angelic doctor Saint Thomas calls the virtue of a soul that is perfectly purged. This virtue, said the holy Father, is possessed by the soul when God brings it to such a state that it feels not the movements of vice, nor its assaults, attacks or temptations, because of the loftiness of the virtue which dwells in this soul. Hence there arises within it and comes to it a most lofty perfection which takes from it all concern about being praised or exalted or insulted or humbled or about whether men speak well of it or ill. For, as these loving and anagogical movements raise the soul to so high and sublime a state, their truest effect upon the soul is to make it forget all things other than its Beloved, Who is Jesus Christ. Hence, as has been said, when it is

united with its God and in converse with Him, it finds that no temptations can wound it, since they cannot rise to that place whither the soul has risen or to which God has raised it: *Non accedet ad te malum.*

Here the venerable Father Fray John of the Cross said that attention must be paid to beginners, whose anagogical or loving acts are not so ready, quick or fervent as to enable them to absent themselves entirely from their surroundings and unite themselves with the Spouse. If, he said, they find that, on making this anagogical act, they do not completely forget the vicious movement of the temptation, they should not fail to take advantage of all possible weapons and considerations in order to resist it, until they vanquish the temptation completely. And the way wherein they must resist and vanquish it will be this. First let them resist it with the most fervent anagogical movements whereof they are capable, and let them perform and practise these many times; and, if these suffice not (for the temptation is strong and they are weak), let them then use all the weapons (namely, good meditations and exercises) that they find necessary for this resistance and victory. And let them believe that this method of resistance is excellent and sure, since it includes within itself all the crafts of war which are both important and necessary.

And he would say that those words of the 118th Psalm, *Memor esto verbi tui servo tuo, in quo mihi spem dedisti*, are so powerful and effective that by their means anything whatsoever may be accomplished with God.

And he assured us that, if we devoutly repeated the words of the Holy Gospel, *Nesciebatis quia in his, quae Patris mei sunt, oportet me esse?* our souls would be filled with a desire to do the will of God in imitation of Christ Our Lord, and with a most ardent desire to suffer for love of Him and for the good of souls.

He also said that when once the Divine Majesty intended to destroy the city of Constantinople completely by means of a most cruel tempest, the angels were heard to repeat these words three times: *Sanctus Deus, Sanctus Fortis, Sanctus Immortalis, miserere nobis.* By means of these supplications God was at once appeased and the storm ceased, having already caused much harm and threatened worse. Thus, he would say, these words have power with God in such individual needs as fire, water, winds, tempests, wars and other necessities of soul and body, honour, possessions, etc.

SIXTH SAYING.—He would also say that love for the good of one's neighbour is born of the spiritual and contemplative life, and that, as

this is commanded us by our Rule, we are also clearly commanded and charged to have this zeal for the profit of our neighbour. For the Rule aims at making persons observe the mixed and compounded life so that they may embrace and include within themselves two lives, the active and the contemplative, in one. This mixed life the Lord chose for Himself because it is the most perfect. And the state and method of life of the religious who embraces it is the most perfect of its kind; but, in saying and teaching this, he would say that it should not be repeated publicly because of the few religious that there were, and lest these should become uneasy, but rather we should hint at the contrary until there were a great number of friars.

And, when he expounded the words of Christ Our Lord already quoted: *Nesciebatis quia in his, quae Patris mei sunt, oportet me esse?* he said that that which is of the Eternal Father must here be understood of nothing else than the redemption of the world, and the good of souls, wherein Christ Our Lord uses the means fore-ordained by the Eternal Father. And he would repeat that marvellous phrase written in confirmation of this truth by Saint Dionysius the Areopagite: *Omnium Divinorum Divinissimum est cooperari Deo in salutem animarum.* That is, that the supreme perfection of any souls in their rank and degree is to progress and grow, according to their talent and means, in the imitation of God, and the most wondrous and divine thing is to be a co-operator with Him in the conversion and conquest of souls. For in this there shine the very works of God, and to imitate Him in them is the greatest glory. For this reason Christ Our Lord called them works of His Father and cares of His Father. And it is clearly true that compassion for our neighbour grows the more according as the soul is more closely united with God through love; for the more we love, the more we desire that this same God shall be loved and honoured by all. And the more we desire this, the more we labour for it, both in prayer and in all other possible and necessary exercises.

And such is the fervour and power of God's charity that those of whom He takes possession can never again be limited by their own souls or contented with them. Rather it seems to them a small thing to go to Heaven alone, wherefore they strive with yearnings and celestial affections and the keenest diligence to take many to Heaven with them. This arises from the great love which they have for their God and it is the true fruit and effect of perfect prayer and contemplation.

SEVENTH SAYING.—He was accustomed to say that two things serve the soul as wings whereby it is able to rise to union with God:

these are affective compassion for the death of Christ and for our neighbour; and that, when the soul pauses to have compassion for the Cross and Passion of the Lord, it must remember that herein He was working our redemption all alone, as it is written: *Torcular calcavi solus*. From this thought the soul will receive many other most useful thoughts and meditations.

EIGHTH SAYING.—In a certain address which he gave in the Convent of Almodóvar del Campo he spoke of solitude and repeated the words of Pope Pius II of blessed memory, who said that a restless friar was worse than a devil. And he added that, if religious had to pay visits, they should always go to houses of good repute, where the conversation was restrained and seemly.

NINTH SAYING.—Expounding the words of Saint Paul, *Signa apostolatus nostri facta sunt super vos, in omni patientia, in signis, et prodigiis, et virtutibus*, he pointed out that the Apostle set patience above miracles. Patience, therefore, is a surer sign of the apostolic man than the resuscitation of the dead. I can testify that Fray John of the Cross was an apostolic man with respect to that virtue, for he endured with a singular patience and tolerance all the trials that beset him, which were very great and would have brought down the cedars of Mount Lebanon.

TENTH SAYING.—Speaking of those who had to confess women, as one experienced herein, he would say that they should be somewhat stern with them, for to treat them gently only affected their feelings and they failed to profit thereby. And he said that God had punished him with regard to this, by hiding from him a certain woman's very grave sin; she had deceived him for some time, and she did not trust him because he was gentle with her; and the Lord ordained things so that it should be revealed to him in another way within our own Order, and of this I have full information.

ELEVENTH SAYING.—He once said to me that if we should see urbanity lost in the Order, which was part of Christian and monastic life, and if instead there should enter cruelty and ferocity in superiors (which is a vice proper to barbarians) we should mourn the Order as ruined. For, he said, who has ever seen men persuaded to love the virtues and things of God by harshness and with blows? In this connection he would quote those words from the 34th chapter of Ezechiel: *Cum austeritate imperatis eis, et cum potentia*.

And he said that, when religious are brought up with such irrational severity, they become pusillanimous in undertaking things of great

virtue, as if they had been brought up among wild beasts, as Saint Thomas says in the 20th Opusculum of *De Regimine Principum*, Chapter III, in these words: *Naturale est enim, ut homines sub timore nutriti in servilem degenerent animum, et pusillanimes fiant ad omne virile opus et strenuum.* And he also quoted the words of Saint Paul: *Patres, nolite ad iracundiam provocare filios vestros, ne pusillanimes fiant.*

TWELFTH SAYING.—And he said it was to be feared that to train religious in this way was a mark of the devil, for if they are trained by this method of fear, their superiors dare not warn or reprove them when they go astray. And if, by this means or by any other, the Order should reach such a state that those of its members (especially the seniors) who, by the laws of charity and justice, in meetings and chapters and on other occasions, dared not say what they should, either through weakness, pusillanimity or fear lest they should offend their superior and therefore should be given no office (which is a common ambition), the Order would become completely relaxed and ruined.

THIRTEENTH SAYING.—So true is this that the good father Fray John of the Cross would say that he would prefer that such friars should not make their profession in the Order, for if they did so it would be governed by the vice of ambition and not by the virtue of charity and justice. And this (he would say) is clearly seen when nobody raises protests in chapter, but everything is ceded and allowed to pass, because everyone is intent on pressing his own interests. This causes serious harm to the common good and nourishes the vice of ambition.

He said that denunciations should be made without correction, since what has just been described is a pernicious vice opposed to the common good.

And whenever he said these things it was after he had spent long periods in prayer and colloquy with Our Lord.

FOURTEENTH SAYING.—He would say that superiors must often beseech God to give them religious prudence so that they might rule wisely and lead the souls committed to their charge to Heaven. He was accustomed to praise Father Fray Agustín de los Reyes for this virtue, which he had in an excellent degree.

FIFTEENTH SAYING.—I sometimes heard him say that there is no lie so carefully devised and composed that, if we study it carefully, we cannot tell it in one way or in another to be a lie.

Nor, he would say, is there any devil so completely transfigured as an angel of light as not to be recognizable if he be looked at carefully.

Nor is there any hypocrite so artfully concealed and dissimulated that you cannot discover him after a few glances.

SIXTEENTH SAYING.—With regard to a severe punishment imposed by a certain superior, he pronounced a phrase divine in its wisdom: Christians, and especially religious, must always see that they chastise the bodies of delinquents, lest their souls be endangered, but they must not use extraordinary cruelty, as do tyrants and those who rule by cruelty. He said that superiors should often read the words of Isaias, chapter xli, and of Saint Paul (1 Corinthians ix, 10).

SEVENTEENTH SAYING.—On one occasion, when a candidate for the habit was proposed to him, he had several conversations with him, and advised that he should not be received because a bad odour came from his mouth, and this signified that he was unhealthy inwardly; and as a rule, he said, such persons are evilly inclined, cruel, false, faint-hearted, murmurers, etc.; for it is a rule of philosophy that the habits of the soul correspond to the temper and humour of the body.

This is all I remember at the moment. If I remember more, I will advise our Father General in fulfilment of his command. Given in Mexico, on the twenty-sixth day of March, 1618.—Fray Eliseo de los Mártires.