

MONASTIC WISDOM SERIES: NUMBER FOURTEEN

Gonzalo Maria Fernández, ocsa

## **God Alone**

*A Spiritual Biography of  
Blessed Rafael Arnáiz Barón*

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*Gonzalo Maria Fernández, ocsso*

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# God Alone

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Blessed Rafael Arnáiz Barón*

by

Gonzalo Maria Fernández, ocsO

Translated with a Note by  
Hugh McCaffery, ocsO

Edited by  
Kathleen O'Neill, ocsO

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## PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION

To no one on earth has it been granted to gaze at heaven through an open door. Nonetheless, one may, perhaps, attempt to catch a glimpse of it through the chinks that open up in the Cistercian monastery of San Isidoro de Dueñas. When, after the chanting of each Psalm, the monks bow profoundly and say, “Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit,” one gets some idea of what the heavenly chant of praise to the Lord is like.

The book you are reading comes from that monastery. It is an exceptionally rare book. Indeed, I am not sure that it is merely a book. It is rather a modicum of mystery. Father Gonzalo has attempted the impossible: to write an account of a mystical matter. Mysticism carries with it, even linguistically, the sense of something hidden, impenetrable. Mystical—from the same Greek root as *mysterious*—is what can neither be said nor shared, while a book is a means of communication: its ultimate purpose is that it be read.

Obviously, Father Gonzalo has not achieved the impossible. By reading this work one cannot really “know” the mind and heart of Brother Rafael. But one can gain understanding of and love for him; maybe envy him also. Then, one will no longer understand oneself completely, and thereby one will have come closer to the Truth.

Father Gonzalo has written an objective, scientific and strictly systematic work. With deep knowledge of his subject and perceptible devotion, he has dealt with the rich and delicate material that comprises Brother Rafael’s original writings. And Father Gonzalo has definitely achieved his purpose. He has brought off something surprising and unexpected. The objective narrative so penetrates the mind and heart of the reader that it melts and merges with the reader’s own living. This, of course, was made

possible only because the author had already given himself completely to the same kind of living. Otherwise there would have been no such result.

This work does truly and successfully convey the spiritual development of the one whose story it is. This development was more complicated than that of most others, not just because of its quality, but also because of the frequent shuttling that he had to go through: entry at his La Trappe, returning to the outside world, another attempt at monastic life, etc. Although all of this could be found in earlier publications, it is recounted here with very great clarity, and above all with the sensitivity that the matter demands, the implicit psychological analysis of which is both extremely interesting and free from pedantry and dishonesty.

Biographies, as a rule, are written about the “top people,” noted participants in historical events of far-reaching significance. Their biographers enjoy the benefit that accrues to their efforts from the fame of those whose lives they write about. No matter how obscure and complex the personalities of such active people may be, it is always easier to write their biographies than it is to put together the “spiritual biography” of a contemplative monk, which makes the work of the author of this book doubly admirable.

Readers who begin to turn the pages of this short book are warned that they will not find in it even one single piece of literary criticism. True, Saint John of the Cross—the greatest poet in Spanish literature!—is often quoted, but he is not credited with any influence whatever over either the thought or the writing of Brother Rafael. Friar John and Brother Rafael did but follow parallel paths under the impulse of the same inspiring: that of the Spirit who transcends everything.

Once taken up, this book has simply got to be read, read carefully and completely. Possibly at the end one may not have grasped its ultimate meaning. But, after all, this book is meant not so much to be understood as to be lived, to the extent of the grace granted to the reader by God.

—Patricio Pemán

## PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

Fray Luis de León wrote that he had come to know Mother Teresa of Jesus through her writings and through her daughters. And, in fact, in her writings she reveals herself and the wealth of her spiritual experience, her sure feel for Gospel values, her outstanding psychological insight, her never-failing charm, and the genius of her self-expression; and the charm of the Holy Mother lives on in her Carmelite Sisters. Something similar can be said of Brother Rafael: we can come to know him through his writings and through his fellow Trappists. In his writings he presents himself as a Christian and a man of prayer, as someone with a monastic vocation both inside and outside the cloister, and he captivates the reader with the conversation of a human being marvelously alive. Likewise one discovers a calling and a mentality like his in the Trappists of San Isidore de Deuñas. Once across the railway tracks on the way to the monastery, one finds oneself in another world with another language. Visitors can be impressed by the peace, by the good order, by the liturgical chant; Rafael and the monks have also and above all found God in their La Trappe. "God alone fully satisfies" (Saint Teresa). "God alone" (Rafael). This precious book tells becomingly and quietly, with depth and unction, what Rafael found.

In 1988 the *Complete Works* of Brother Rafael were published by the Monte Carmelo Editions of Burgos and by the Monastery of Dueñas. They had already appeared in part in *A Secret of La Trappe* (Brother Rafael, 1944) by his uncle, the Duke of Maqueda, and in the compilation made by his mother, *Writings and Biographical Details about Brother Mary Rafael Arnáiz Barón, Trappist Monk* (1947). These writings were like a loud knocking that concentrated the minds of Christians on someone both secluded and splendid. The resulting sound wave has kept spreading to places and persons ever since. The present work was written by the

present Abbot of Rafael's La Trappe, Dom Gonzalo M. Fernández. It is an expertly planned guide that simply and perceptively traces in successive stages the writings, the chronology and, as far as possible, the story of Rafael's soul. It is written with exact knowledge, with fellow-feeling for a monk of the same spiritual lineage, together with the simplicity proper to a monk interiorly detached, and yet a partner in vocation and experience. Rafael, like Saint Teresa, does indeed live on in his writings and in his brother monks.

Rafael was beatified by John Paul II, in the piazza of Saint Peter's, Rome, on September 27, 1992. How great was the reverential joy we all experienced when the portrait of the lowly Trappist oblate appeared on the tapestry hanging from the balcony of the loggia of the Vatican Basilica amid the thunderous applause of the numberless crowd! Once again God was publicly exalting the lowly. This new edition of the book makes its appearance subsequent to Rafael's beatification, in the light of which its pages gain fresh splendor and speak to us with even greater eloquence. While a seminarian at Avila, I often used to visit the country district around Pedrosillo from which Rafael came straight to his La Trappe. As bishop of Palencia, I had the privilege of making the ritual request for Brother Rafael's beatification during the solemn ceremony of September 27 in Rome. In our diocese we benefit by the God-given grace of this monastery; I am delighted with the friendship of Father Abbot Gonzalo; it has been a pleasure to write these few lines.

—Ricardo Blásquez, Bishop of Palencia, Palencia, Spain

## TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

This translation has been done with Dom Gonzalo's express permission, and with my Abbot's generous encouragement.

Three words used in the course of the narrative would seem to call for explanation in the case of a reader less well-acquainted with monastic and Cistercian terminology.

**TRAPPIST:** a Cistercian monk or nun belonging to the reform among Cistercians that originated during the second-half of the seventeenth century at the Cistercian monastery of La Trappe in Normandy. During the French Revolution all the religious houses in France were suppressed by the National Assembly, so a group of monks from La Trappe set up a monastery in Switzerland. From then on, there was a universal tendency to call these Cistercians and their successors "Trappists."

**OBLATE:** a member of a Trappist-Cistercian community who shares its monastic life in the measure appointed by the Superior, and is not bound by the vows taken in the Order.

**COWL:** The Trappist-Cistercian cowl is a white, ankle-length over-garment with long, wide sleeves; the cowl of monks (but not that of nuns) is topped by a hood of the same material. It is regarded as *the* garment of fully-professed monks and nuns.

—Hugh McCaffery, ocsa, Mount Melleray Abbey,  
Cappoquin, Waterford, Ireland

## GENERAL EDITOR'S NOTE

After this biography was written, *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* began to publish serially the monastic writings of Brother Rafael. These were translated by Sister Juanita Colon and Sister Charles Longuemare of Mount Saint Mary's Abbey, Wrentham, Massachusetts. Sister Juanita began the project and wrote an introduction to the first three essays, before her poor health prevented her from continuing the work. Following her death, Sister Charles picked up the work and translated the following four sections. These seven offprints were published in *CSQ* from 1998 to 2003, illustrated by sixteen line drawings by Brother Rafael. In 2003 these offprints were gathered together to form a *CSQ* reprint. Copies of this 170-page paperback book, *Life and Writings of Blessed Rafael Arnáiz Barón* are still available from Cistercian Studies Quarterly, O.L. Mississippi Abbey, 8400 Abbey Hill Ln, Dubuque IA 52003-9501.

—Patrick Hart, ocsa / Abbey of Gethsemani,  
3642 Monks Rd., Trappist, KY 40051

## INTRODUCTION

Blessed Rafael's own writings are undoubtedly the most important and direct source for a spiritual biography of him. Owing to various circumstances, both interior and exterior in his life, as will become evident in the course of this book, Rafael wrote quite a lot.

Apart from a few letters he wrote in early childhood, it can be said that all his writings can be classified as "spiritual writing," since they disclose the tendency of his prayer. They are not in fact doctrinal or didactic; they are writings that came from his heart and mind, a wonderful upsurge of prayer as he recalls happenings in his life. Rafael himself says so in some of his letters and short pieces: "As soon as I put pen to paper there come words, mere human words; nonetheless, from the heart there spring desires that without deliberation turn into prayer. My writings are at one and the same time my own reflections with myself and prayers to God."

We may conclude, then, that what Rafael was silently aware of in his heart, he communicated resonantly in his writings. He himself was to say:

To speak about God and about what God achieves in creatures goes to make what really interests me in this present life. If it is not a case of speaking about God, I prefer to be silent. If I do not speak to you about God and the Virgin, what would you like me to speak to you about? I know about nothing else, and care about nothing else.

And he does it all with an elegance of expression that experts in the art of good writing are not slow to recognize. But despite the brilliance of his style, Rafael finds it difficult to put his thoughts and interior experience into words: "At times I put

aside the pen that does not say what I want to, because it neither knows how nor is able. . . . Would that I could convey with the poor words I put into my copybook some idea of the truths that one comes to realize only when one is silent and at *prayer*." Occasionally in his writings Rafael reveals the motives behind his writings:

I do not presume to write in order to be read . . . . I write for two reasons. One, because I am convinced that writing and treating of the things of God is very profitable for my soul . . . and reason two, I have the time at my disposal, and so it seems to me to be a way of using it for God's greater glory.

Still, besides these reasons expressly divulged by Rafael, there are times when he writes in order to help others, telling them how he thinks about God, how he speaks about him, while at the same time presenting them with the heights of Christian spirituality. Among such writings as these are found, for example, the booklet *At the Foot of the Crucifix*, dedicated to his brother Leopold, and the twelve "spiritual" letters written to his uncle and aunt, the Duke and Duchess of Maqueda, from Oviedo once his second entering of the monastery in January 1936 had been decided. These letters are particularly worth mentioning because Rafael wrote them with the explicit desire that once read they be destroyed. He makes this request very clearly and strongly: "Your letters will be read, answered and torn up. Do the same with mine; it is on this understanding that I write to you." It would seem that this desire that these letters should disappear, a desire made clear even before they were written, makes them all the more valuable, with all their spontaneity and sincerity, as a means of knowing the soul of Rafael to the fullest extent.<sup>1</sup>

Lastly, Rafael sometimes wrote under obedience; for instance, his booklet *God and My Soul* was written at the orders of his confessor, in special circumstances to be dealt with in due course. Rafael's writings, written for different motives and about different matters, were published to some extent in the book that his

1. Providentially, Rafael's uncle and aunt kept these letters, which because of their matter and form, and above all because of the good they did, particularly to his aunt Maria, can be regarded as the most significant of all his letters.

uncle, the Duke of Maqueda, wrote entitled *A Secret of La Trappe* (*Brother Rafael*). Later, Rafael's mother made a compilation of her son's writings and put together the book *Writings and Biographical Details about Brother Mary Rafael Arnáiz Barón, Trappist Monk*, a book that attained its third edition before her death. Later still Rafael's writings were published under the title of *Life and Writings of Brother Mary Rafael Arnáiz Barón, Trappist Monk*, a book that in its tenth edition was made still more valuable by the addition of twelve unedited letters.

At the beginning of the Process for Rafael's beatification, a careful compilation had to be made of all his writings. Here is the list that appears in the document from the Sacred Congregation for the Causes of Saints concerning his Process, and entitled *Statement concerning the writings: Index of the Writings of the Servant of God*:

- 12 cards written to his parents and siblings
- 39 letters written to the same persons and to his grandmother, Fernanda
- 40 letters to his uncle and aunt, the Duke and Duchess of Maqueda
- 22 letters to the monks of San Isidoro de Dueñas
- 10 holy pictures inscribed and addressed to members of his family and to monks of his monastery
- A poem and some spiritual verses
- Various booklets:
  - Impressions of La Trappe*<sup>2</sup>
  - The Trappist's Apologia*
  - Meditations of a Trappist*
  - At the Foot of the Crucifix or My Copybook*
  - God and My Soul*
- Other miscellaneous original pieces

Until 1988 all Rafael's writings then available were not fully published. Discretion dictated that many details be kept under

2. Rafael always used *La Trapa* when mentioning his monastery, which belongs to the Order of the Cistercians of the Strict Observance. This use is retained in this book. [This translation uses the French "La Trappe" which is customary in English.—Ed.]

wraps, since they were about intimate family matters, and their disclosure could have been unwelcome to those involved. After the death at the Convent of the Incarnation (Discalced Carmelites), at Avila, of Sister Mary Clement of the Transverberation, the former Duchess of Maqueda, the aunt to whom Rafael wrote so often, it was possible, thanks to the permission of her family, to publish at long last the *Complete Works*. Nonetheless, when working on his spiritual biography earlier on, all of Rafael's writings were put at my disposal. It has seemed preferable to base this work directly on them, while filling out the biographical references with the already mentioned writings of his uncle and of his mother, and the *Statement about the Introduction of his Cause*, which among other things contains the declarations made by the witnesses at the Ordinary Process of Palencia and at the Process of Inquiry at Oviedo, with a view to the beatification of Brother Rafael, and of the judgement given by the two theologians chosen by Rome to act as censors of his writings.<sup>3</sup>

Finally, it must be admitted that this biography was not written for publication, but came about for reasons of study. This gives it scientific objectivity, since all that is mentioned in it is based on more than nine hundred references to Rafael's writings and to the other documentation already mentioned.<sup>4</sup> Suggestions from friends that it be published have been accepted, and it is done as a service to Brother Rafael's Cause, and in the hope of pleasing and helping many who are sincerely interested in getting to know him more and more, because they find that he provides both light and strength for their own personal journey to God.

3. Shortly after the publication of the *Complete Works* of Brother Rafael, some previously unknown (and consequently unedited) pieces came to light: six letters that Rafael wrote to Don Merino del Hierro, which were passed on with permission for their publication. The first five date from between August 15 and September 29, 1934. The sixth and last is dated January 3, 1936. Both their style and content tally with Rafael's other writings of that time, although certain details in them make more evident than ever some already known characteristics of Rafael. These previously unedited letters find their place in the latest edition of the *Complete Works*.

4. In order to make it easier for the reader, most mention of particular sources used has been omitted.

# I

## AMONG HIS OWN

### Birth and family background

On April 9, 1911, at half-past eight in the evening of Palm Sunday, in the city of Burgos, Rafael Arnáiz Barón was born, the first child of a truly Catholic marriage. From the very first moment, his birth was regarded by his parents, Rafael and Maria Mercedes, as a divine blessing.

The family was well-to-do, for not only was Rafael's father a forestry engineer, but the family owned a few estates as well. It all added up to a family fortune quite sufficient to provide amply for the needs and education of the four children born of the marriage.

As regards the faith, Rafael's parents (particularly his mother) were practicing and fervent Catholics. They were honorable people of moral integrity, careful about the education of their children, considerate and fair with their servants and employees. It was in this Christian environment that Rafael lived until he entered the third level college at Madrid, and where not only his vocation to La Trappe but that of his brother Luis Fernando to the Carthusians, and that of his sister Mercedes, who entered among the Ursulines of Jesus, were fostered. The great love these parents had for their children did not prevent them from generously giving them to God in the religious state. Letters from both Rafael's father and mother leave no doubt as to their dispositions when faced with their son's decision to become a monk, dispositions full of human feelings and Christian spirit at one and the same time.

In a letter of January 10, 1934, Rafael's father wrote to the Reverend Abbot of the monastery of San Isidoro de Dueñas as follows:

Reverend Father, my son Rafael has told us of his decision to enter the Order to which your monastery belongs, and . . . he has asked us for our permission and consent. Although . . . viewing the matter from an angle more earthly than that of our son, we would have preferred that he had waited until completing his university studies, nonetheless because, as seems to be the case, the Lord is calling him to his service, and has, in conformity with his divine will, so arranged things that now is the time, we accept his plan with all reverence, and so not only freely but most gratefully welcome the choice that divine Providence has made of one of our children; since God gave him to us, we are ready to give him back to Him.<sup>1</sup>

On January 11, Doña Mercedes expressed her reaction when writing to her own mother, Rafael's grandmother, about his decision to become a monk:

Mother mine, on the eighth of the month my son told us of his desire and decision to go to La Trappe . . . As becomes a Christian, I do not rebel; I welcome and obey and give to God the treasure so dear that he was pleased to lend me for twenty-two years . . . We have given him full permission, without any reservation, as God so demands, and he is going . . . His father himself will take him to the door of the monastery . . . We believe that he should answer his call as soon as possible. When God calls, one should answer immediately, even if it means terrible wrenching, for delay could squander such a clear and holy vocation . . . While his going pains me intensely, I experience at the same time extraordinary joy at seeing myself chosen without any deserving as the mother of such a son . . . I dread being ungrateful to the One who has given me so much.

1. Even more Christian was the reaction of Rafael's father when Rafael made known his decision to enter the monastery for the second time. "When I told him," writes Rafael, "the first thing he said was that he had made a complete donation into God's hands . . . , that the sacrifice he had made in handing me over to God he was only too pleased to repeat, for he wanted only one thing . . . that I should become a saint so as to be able to sanctify him . . . and that, far from any pain or displeasure, the fact that the Lord called me so insistently, and that he himself sees my vocation to be so sure, fills him with immense joy and very great gratitude to God."

The behavior of Rafael's parents contributes to a better understanding of Rafael's great esteem for them when he later said, "I have just the kind of parents that I could not deserve," and he felt greatly encouraged by their generosity: "On seeing such a magnificent display of my parents' magnanimity and the glory that they were giving to God during those days, I forgot my own pains and sufferings. How could what I was doing compare with the sublime unselfishness of my parents? What magnanimity!"

### **Childhood and schooldays**

Rafael's childhood passed quietly. From his earliest days he showed himself understanding, intelligent, easy to educate. His parents had no difficulty whatever in bringing up one so docile, with such an in-built instinct for good. Even when very small he showed his compassion and love for others. In the Process before beatification, it is reported that when one of Rafael's siblings was thirsty and asked the maid for a glass of water, he used to say, "Get up yourself, and don't bother the girl." Such compassion is all the more commendable in one so young. And the fact is that from a very early age he was moved with compassion for the hurts of others, and he avoided as far as possible being a nuisance to those about him.

At the age of eight and a half, on October 25, 1919, he received Holy Communion for the first time, in the church of the monastery of the Visitandine Sisters at Burgos. In October 1920 he entered the school of La Merced that the Jesuits had in that city, and he was exceptional for his diligence and good conduct. But all too soon he had to stay away from classes because of sickness. Although Rafael had not had any health troubles before this, on December 1 of that year he became sick owing to what was diagnosed as bacterial fever. Prevented from receiving Communion at school on Sundays when the Sodality of Mary Immaculate did so, he requested the college rector, Father Oraa, S.J., who often visited him, to bring Communion to him at home; the Father agreed to do so, and Rafael was able to receive Holy Communion every Sunday thereafter, a custom he maintained for the rest of his life.

Having moved to Madrid for the sake of better medical attention, he sent two postcards from there to his father. These,

from April 1921, are the earliest samples of his writings now available, but they are so brief that they tell us almost nothing about him. Still, he tells his father that he is sending him a card painted by himself, which goes to show that he already took an interest in painting.<sup>2</sup>

On May 4, 1921, the pleurisy that had been dormant months before made its appearance in a rather serious way. He bore the corresponding sufferings with great patience, thus preparing himself to some extent for all the suffering that would come to him during his life, and would draw from his pen beautiful writing about the Cross. Similarly at this time there occurred an event that could well have made a positive contribution to the Marian spirituality already evident in his early youth. Once Rafael recovered from his illness, he was brought by his father to Zaragoza to offer him to the Virgin of Pilar, while giving thanks for his cure. In October of that year, Rafael returned to school, and continued his studies without further interruption.

In 1922, Rafael's father was moved to Oviedo. There Rafael and his brothers Luis Fernando and Leopoldo became day boys at the Jesuit College of San Ignacio in that city. There Rafael went ahead with his secondary education from the beginning of the school year 1923. Of this period of his life there is sound testimony that makes accessible further information about his character, about the kind of person that was being formed in him. It is the written testimony of the Prefect of the college, Father Pascual Arroyo:

Rafael Arnáiz Barón . . . an intelligent child; his school reports witness to his diligence, and his remarkable ability at mathematics; he was not quite so remarkable at written composition, just where he was later to excel so much . . . From the very first he charmed the whole school, and was the very center and source of the gladness he radiated to his companions . . . as with genial originality and gently mocking tone, he drew to himself irresistibly all who met him. Earnest and exact about his duties, he studied hard, and reports about his studies and his conduct were always above the ordinary. Owing to his in-

2. Another childhood piece which has been preserved is a letter to the Magi that he wrote in French, from Burgos on January 2, 1922.

tense and constant piety, he was one of the committee in charge of the Solidarity of Saint Stanislaus . . . Rafael, then, can be described as an intelligent and cheerful child, mischievous at games, serious at his studies, profoundly pious.

Already in Rafael's school days can be seen the beginnings of characteristics that would later become so evident in his personality: the cheerfulness and sociability that his smile expressed even in moments of suffering; his controlled humor, and, to balance it, his earnestness in the fulfillment of duty; and all of it immersed in the strong piety of personal relationship with God. Well-set in personality and demeanor, there was nothing but normality in his behavior; he was just like any other youngster of his age, whom all found pleasant, while, at the same time, owing to his seriousness and the religious content of his conversation, his schoolfellows were already inclined to think he would become a religious.

### **Rafael's artistic temperament**

In 1926, while continuing with his classes at school, at his own request and with a view to his future study of architecture he began attending classes in drawing and painting with Eugenio Tamayo, the landscape-painter. Already from the age of thirteen, Rafael had been attending classes in drawing, and he used to spend all his free time at it, which explains why his home gradually filled up with sketches and colored drawings.

Love for pictorial art was always the most notable aspect of Rafael's temperament; he saw everything through the prism of color and form. He was gifted and very original; landscapes were his favorite subject. It could well be that God used this preference of his, this tendency, as a means to draw Rafael all the more to himself. Drawing, painting, expressing on canvas or card the creativity of his artistic soul, welcoming every least suggestion of true art was Rafael's delight, since his capacity for imagery was colossal. This is abundantly evident in the 195 paintings and drawings of his on exhibit in his monastery, San Isidoro de Dueñas.

His pictorial powers both in concept and in actual completion were considerable, and he was far from fussy. His teacher says of him:

He was magnificent in the art of decoration, and had done some truly outstanding pieces . . . both in oils and in water-color he worked to large design and without fussiness; he needed only a few highly descriptive brush strokes to bring it off; he knew how to give strength and setting to all he did. He had a very exact sense of color, and in some of his pictures he was able to achieve the most difficult tints. One peculiarity was that when Rafael did landscapes, he preferred to completely exclude from them any sign of people; none of his works contain a single human figure that could take or distract from the luminosity of the whole.<sup>3</sup>

This psychological trait in the artistic mode of Rafael, mentioned by his teacher, could be interpreted as a sign of misanthropy, but would seem rather to come from what was idealistic and austere in his temperament. Intensely interested in the objective that he was aiming at with pencil or paintbrush, he regarded the addition of some human figure or other as meaningless, and he used to avoid it completely; possibly he did so without noticing. As a result, the beauty of his objective appears whole and spotless in his paintings. Rafael was a person of genuine good taste. This personality trait that emerges in his art helps us better understand his decision to enter the Trappists, with all that it meant to him in its thoroughness and concentration on one single objective—*God*; he himself would prove it in his well-known *God alone* principle.

Rafael's artistic temperament did not express itself in painting only. Fluent with pencil or paintbrush or charcoal, he was also musical by nature, and played the violin, the guitar and the piano without any musical instruction, being as well able to improvise a piece of music as he was to depict some image or landscape. In addition, although without advertising it, Rafael was a poet. Unable to confine himself to meter, he did not go in for versification, but to the ease with which he wrote was added,

3. In the display of Rafael's works at the monastery of San Isidro de Dueñas, one can see a selection of his paintings, a total of 195 pictures and sketches. When there is adequate space, they will be put on display in their entirety, together with personal objects he used.

even if unsought, a deep sense of rhyme, as is perceptible in some of his prose.<sup>4</sup>

The period of Rafael's life when classes in drawing and painting coincided with the final years of his secondary education is further attested to by his teacher, Eugenio Tamayo, who provides plenty of detail and further information about some aspects of Rafael's meditative personality at the time that includes his first stirrings of desire for an ascetic, as yet undefined, life. Tamayo writes:

I always remember how he used to stand silent, facing the easel for hours in my studio . . . even then I could notice something in him that drew me irresistibly . . . and as the years passed . . . I came to understand that one so special was not destined for the business of ordinary life. There was in him what drove him to ever greater heights, and before long he shared with me his intimate secrets. I was the first to hear from his own lips of his longing for an ascetic and silent life, not yet defined . . . the very life he embraced years later in that monastery of La Trappe.

It was at this time also that Rafael's artistic talent enabled him to cooperate with his mother in the theatrical productions that she helped organize for charitable and cultural purposes. On such occasions, he behaved like any normal young man, was sociable, cheerful, amused and amusing, without hurting anyone's feelings; an aficionado of good music, of artistic dancing, of poetry. He helped his mother in the preparation of the stage, which he decorated with very good taste; he also gave rehearsals for the actors, even if he himself had no desire whatever to make a public appearance on the stage, showing already that longing for hiddenness that would later lead him to the hidden life of La Trappe.

### **Rafael's first relations with and impressions of La Trappe**

In 1929 Rafael completed his secondary education; he had just reached the age of eighteen. As a reward for completing his

4. The music of verse is clearly audible in some of the paragraphs of his *At the Foot of the Crucifix/My Copybook*.

studies and as a rest from his school tasks, his parents sent him to an estate in Avila belonging to his uncle and aunt, the Duke and Duchess of Maqueda, relatives on his mother's side, who from this time on would regard him as another of their children. Rafael's affection for and attachment to them is obvious from the fact that he wrote more letters to them than to anyone else, among which letters are the twelve "spiritual" ones he wrote to them after his first departure from the monastery, letters that, as indicated in the Introduction, are very pertinent for the story of his soul.

The spiritual friendship that now began between Rafael and his uncle and aunt came to have such depth and to be of such benefit to him that, writing to his parents from Madrid, he was to say that going to Avila was for him fully half his life. In fact, the development of Rafael's vocation to monastic life was conditioned by his relationship with his uncle and aunt. The Duke of Maqueda was described as "very Trappist," and Rafael shared his uncle's ideas to the full.

Having completed his secondary education, Rafael now began to prepare in earnest to enter the School of Architecture. Architecture, which suited his talents so well, was his great dream. After taking a degree at the University of Oviedo on April 15, 1930, he entered the College of Architecture in Madrid on April 26 of that year.<sup>5</sup> Once on vacation, he went to the house of his uncle and aunt at Pedrosillo (Avila) to spend some months there, where he did some paintings of Saint Ferdinand and Saint Paul for the stained-glass windows of the chapel, and he availed himself of the opportunity to go on an excursion through the different provinces of Castille, finding Salamanca most impressive. From this stay at Avila comes Rafael's first letter as an adult, one written to his father on June 23, 1930, a very pleasant piece, full of good humor. It was at this time that his Uncle Leopoldo got him to read the biography of Brother Gabriel, a Trappist Lay Brother of the monastery of Chambarand in France. Rafael read it with devout interest, and it kindled in him the desire to visit some monastery of the same order.

5. Rafael's natural abilities in drawing and painting facilitated his admission into the College, which was generally quite difficult to obtain.

He did not have long to wait, for following his uncle's advice, on September 21 that year Rafael paid his first visit to the Cistercian monastery of San Isidoro de Dueñas. This event was to prove decisive in the orientation and development of his life. His artistic soul was dazzled by the beauty of the chant and of the liturgy, and by the austere and silent air of spirituality in the place. In a letter to his uncle, Rafael wrote:

The impressions I received in that holy monastery cannot be expressed or, at least, I cannot explain them, God alone knows them . . . I do not know how to explain what I mean, for when one's feelings are somewhat subtle or one experiences something supernatural, the effort to put it into words results in something silly, since it seems to me that, if one is to talk in certain ways about God, our human language is so very poor that it distorts or, at very least, is unable to convey the true meaning . . . Anyhow, I shall tell you what I did and what I saw . . . There came a moment when I began to notice and feel deep personal shame. When, on going into the church to greet the Lord, I saw the monks singing in choir, saw that altar with that statue of the Virgin, saw the reverence the monks had in church, and, above all, when I heard the *Salve* . . . dear Uncle Poldy, God alone knows what I felt . . . I did not know how to pray.

His experience was so engrossing that to his uncle he could write, "That day I remembered nothing, I remembered no one." Still, notwithstanding such a powerful experience, and the desire to return to the monastery and spend at least eight days there, and his wanting to drop his baggage once he reached the station, and return to the monastery, it is not altogether evident that Rafael had decided just then to become a monk. He tells his uncle in the letter:

And you must not think that on seeing and admiring the monks, I envied them. No, because you have taught me something very important, and I have heard you mention it often: that people go to God by many paths and in very different ways; some fly, some walk, and others, the majority, just muddle through; and since God would have it so, so do I.

Nonetheless, in that same letter Rafael makes clear his willingness to enter *La Trappe* at some future date when he mentions

answering, "If God wants it," to a monk who told him that not then, but later, once he had completed his training, he would be needed in the monastery. In fact, Rafael was so impressed, so moved, and so much enjoyed his visit to the monastery, that he would never forget the experience that made him reflect so much; he would recall it later, even as a monk:

When that young man from the outside world saw what he saw, his soul was changed, and possibly the Lord God of Trappists used this outer impression on his senses to make him reflect. And the young man did reflect . . . God used all that was external in order to reach with his divine light that youth's somewhat dreamy soul.

Rafael went on reflecting, and living life as usual among his family. In February of 1931 he became an active member of Night Adoration at Oviedo, whereby he was able in some way, and in anticipation, to live the meaning of the night vigils he had experienced in the monastery, nourishing his spiritual life with nightly and solitary prayer, and growing in the spirit of adoration and praise. This he mentions as early as March 15 of that very year in a letter to his aunt: "Daily my contentment with life increases, and it gives me thousands of reasons and occasions for praising God."

On September 11, 1931, Rafael was in Madrid. From there he wrote to his drawing master, giving him an account of his exams, and telling him that he expected to leave for Avila within a few days. Even if no word of Rafael's explicitly confirms the fact that, in connection with this trip to Avila, he spent a day at his La Trappe on a second visit, it can be taken for granted that he did so, as in a letter to his uncle Leopoldo, conveying his impressions of his first visit to the monastery in September 1930, he tells him: "Father Armando told me not to go there during the winter: the cold would spoil it for me. So I shall go there at this time next year, when no other guests are there, and stay for at least eight days."

Moreover, it was in September 1931 that Rafael wrote his booklet, *Impressions of La Trappe*, which surely refers to this second visit to the monastery. This time Rafael's account of his impressions is more explicit than the previous one, although he still

finds it difficult to give expression to his impressions. This time the impressions he describes show their greater depth when he writes:

We must not let ourselves be led astray by our outward senses, which are usually deceptive . . . Far above all the little details that impress the visitor there is a "something," an "I know not what," impossible to put into words, and which, if faith is lacking, can never be understood . . . So that at La Trappe there happens, as the common saying puts it, "All look, but only a few are able to see" . . . An artist or a person of high sensibility is affected by La Trappe and the lifestyle of its monks, just as by a painting or a sonata . . . But a believing Christian experiences something more than that . . . experiences God in a very clear way . . . leaves the place strengthened in faith and, if the Lord gives the grace, leaves knowing himself a little better . . . and there, alone with God and with one's conscience, one's way of thinking, one's way of feeling, and, what is most important, one's way of behaving in one's ordinary life changes.

During this second visit to the monastery, Rafael looked and really saw beyond the aesthetic and musical beauty that La Trappe presented to him. He discovered that a Trappist lives in God and for God. "God is the only reason in the world for existing." His jovial and cheerful mind was able to find the deep meaning of monastic silence: that far from being empty, it is transformed into prayer:

People will tell you that silence in a monastery is something sad, a difficult point of the Rule . . . Nothing could be more mistaken than that idea . . . Silence in La Trappe is the most cheerful jargon imaginable . . . Indeed, if God enabled us to read hearts, we would see that from a glum-looking Trappist who passes his life in silence, there flows in steady streams a gloriously jubilant song to his Creator, a song full of love for and joy in his God, the loving Father who cares for and comforts him . . . Trappists converse with God in silence.

This conversing with God in prayer leads Rafael to speak of the prayer of praise and supplication of the monks in choir at liturgical prayer; and of the less formal prayer of the Lay Brothers, that in his opinion deserves all the esteem and has

all the efficacy that he describes in terms reminiscent of Saint John of the Cross: "This humble worship that surely is more pleasing to God than many deeds that the world calls charity . . . How much greater in God's eyes is a heartfelt 'Hail Mary' than even the greatest thing done without wholehearted love for God."<sup>6</sup>

The totality of his impressions of La Trappe reveals a Rafael who has deepened his understanding of the monastic calling by discovering the meaning of the principal values that go to make it. Does he already feel that he shares them? It would seem so, since he already had a bent for intimate union with God and for silent converse before the Tabernacle—a rather contemplative disposition. It is odd that all through his account, Rafael refers to Saint Bernard as "our Father Saint Bernard." Yes, there are grounds for holding that by this time the Cistercian spirit was penetrating his soul.

In Rafael's diary for 1932 can be seen the dates and results of his exams. Once these were over, and after a short stay at Pedro-sillo, he arrived at three o'clock in the afternoon of June 17 at the monastery of San Isidoro to make a retreat lasting until June 26 inclusive. It helped to strengthen his vocation. And yet, Rafael, who keeps noting his daily doings, and does mention a variety of activities on the other days, confines himself on June 19 to remarking, "I have become convinced of many things."

6. What Saint John of the Cross wrote was, "As long as a soul has not reached this state of union with God, it is becoming for it to practice love, both in the active and in the contemplative life. But once it has reached this state it is not becoming for it to busy itself in other exterior doings and practices that could in any way hinder it from attending to loving in God, even if they are of great service to God, because a little wholehearted love is more precious in the sight of God and of the soul, and of more help to the Church, although it may seem to effect nothing, than all those other deeds combined" (*Canticle* 8, Song 28,2).