

LETTER TO A FORMER RETREATANT

Francisco de Villanueva

Francisco de Villanueva (1509-1557) took his surname from the small village near Plasencia where he was born. As a young man, he was employed as a sacristan in a local church, and in that capacity was sent to Rome in 1541 by the parish priest to settle some legal disputes. In Rome, he encountered the early Jesuits and asked for admission. He made the Exercises under Alfonso Salmerón and spent a few weeks of novitiate working in the kitchen, before being despatched by Ignatius to Portugal. Tensions with Simão Rodrigues, together with health problems, led to his being sent to study in Alcalá, in central Spain. He never finished his studies (he was eventually ordained priest in 1550 without any formal qualification). He was taken up, rather, with the foundation of what became a highly influential Jesuit college. He showed considerable talent for administration and, above all, a charismatic gift for giving the Exercises. Ignatius named him as one of the best directors he knew.¹

Our knowledge of Villanueva's activity is based almost entirely on hagiographical writing in a manuscript history of the Alcalá foundation by Cristóbal de Castro SJ, dating from around 1600.² Though

¹ Gonçalves da Câmara, *Memoriale*, n. 226.

² The manuscript remains unedited. The significant modern publications drawing on it are: Camilo María Abad, 'Un centro de Ejercicios espirituales en la antigua Compañía: El colegio de Alcalá', *Manresa*, 20 (1948), 153-180, and 21 (1949), 305-324; Antonio Astraín, *Historia de la Compañía de Jesús en la asistencia de España*, volume 1 (Madrid: Sucesores de Rivadeneyra, 1902); Ignacio Iparraguirre, *Práctica de los Ejercicios de San Ignacio de Loyola en vida de su autor. 1522-1556* (Rome: Jesuit Historical Institute, 1946), especially 60-67; Manuel Ruiz Jurado, *Orígenes del noviciado en la Compañía de Jesús* (Rome: Jesuit Historical Institute, 1980); Alfredo Verdoy, 'El jesuita padre Francisco Villanueva (1509-1557): prototipo de un nuevo apóstol en la Castilla de la Reforma católica', *Espacio, tiempo y forma*, 9 (1996), 87-116, reprinted in *Manresa* 68 (1996), 405-428. The Editor is grateful to Fr Verdoy and to Fr Joseph Munitiz for help in obtaining some of this material.

Villanueva seems to have insisted on taking only people of high calibre as retreatants,³ he himself seems almost to have cultivated unattractiveness. Pedro de Ribadaneira, who would have known him in Rome, speaks of him as 'a yokel, pathetic, small in stature, dark-skinned, self-taught and without training in language, base and demeaned in human eyes'.⁴ The combination of intuition and lack of theological training evoked both admiration and controversy. Villanueva's ministry of the Exercises in a university town, like that of Ignatius before him, raised questions about the role of learning in the spiritual life, and provoked accusations of illuminist heresy.

Even now, those who write about significant spiritual directors often express simple admiration and fail to tell an outsider just why the person concerned was so special. But a letter which Castro quotes expresses something of Villanueva's own understanding of giving the Exercises.⁵ The letter is addressed to Alfonso Ramírez de Vergara, a highly placed ecclesiastic. He had made an eight-day retreat with Villanueva in 1549,⁶ and had become a major benefactor of the Jesuits' college in Alcalá, as well as one of their more powerful defenders against charges of novelty and heresy. In 1555, Villanueva has occasion to recall the retreat, and writes authoritatively both about indifference and about the kind of support that a director can legitimately give.

Very Reverend Sir,

The grace and eternal love of Jesus Christ be always with you. Amen.

I've received your letter, and was delighted to hear from it of your good health and of the fruit that is being harvested in your area; may the Lord give you His grace so that you always work in this vineyard of His, and be of service to His creatures, who have cost Him so much.

³ 'He used to say that not everyone was made for perfection, although everyone ought to desire to reach it; and therefore he made a great deal of putting into the Exercises people who had natural gifts, who were capable and stable.' (Castro, quoted in Abad, 'Un centro de Ejercicios', part 1, 178)

⁴ Quoted in Iparraguirre, *Práctica de los Ejercicios*, 60: 'rústico, pobrecito, pequeño de cuerpo, morenillo de rostro, idiota y sin letras humanas, vil y menospreciado en los ojos de los hombres'.

⁵ The text comes from Iparraguirre, *Práctica de los Ejercicios*, 264-265. The transcription and printing are in places problematic, and occasionally this translation draws on corrections made in the secondary sources.

⁶ On that occasion, Castro reports him as saying, 'Praise be to God, that of all the confessions I've made in my life, I've never been so satisfied as with this one'.

For this is what we all must seek, since we are co-workers with Christ, some in one respect, others in another, following different callings. For it would be something wrong to want so high a Lord not to have a variety of representatives and ways of making use of people. And though it seems just natural that everyone desires the growth of their own standard, their own squadron—it's meritorious to desire this and seek it, because it's for God's service—our Lord has nevertheless been kind enough to me to give me a desire which is so free that I don't want to see any man, however excellent he is, in the Society who is not brought there by His hand. Rather, I ask His Majesty not to allow any man to come to it who does *not* come through His hand. For with those whom He brings, even if they are men of straw, the enterprise will take on good colour and growth; and with those whom human beings bring, it will be ruined. And I regard the peace, union and conformity that the Divine Majesty sees fit to give in this Society among those who live within it as a great good—so much so that I think it would be like death to see it ruined and corrupted. For it seems to me half-way to an earthly paradise.

I wrote to you, sir, inviting you to come and preach in this area, in need as it was of sound teaching, and because I thought much fruit could be gathered here, as you were doing in other areas. And also because some serious-minded people had indicated to me that they knew you as a person who was wanting to serve our Lord in this Society, and wanting to consider this, now that our Lord had removed the impediment.⁷ So I thought that there was a good opportunity—given also that Fr Francis,⁸ who wanted to meet you, was here—for you to be of benefit through your teaching for this area. And you could also consider what they were telling me that you so much wanted, so that,

⁷ We are in no position to reconstruct the story of Ramírez de Vergara's decision processes with regard to entering the Jesuits. This 1555 letter presents the matter as definitively resolved in the negative. But we have two Ignatian letters which suggest something different. On 14 June 1554, Ignatius wrote to Villanueva about special provisions to be made in the case of Vergara's entry (MHSJ EI 7, 107-109); and on 30 March 1556, Ignatius wrote a valuable letter to Vergara himself, advocating the use of reason as a basis for discernment, even when consolation is lacking (MHSJ EI 11, 184-186; English translation in *Inigo: Letters Personal and Spiritual*, selected by Michael Ivens, translated by Joseph A. Munitiz [Hurstpierpoint: Inigo Enterprises, 1995], 264-265). He never formally entered, so far as we can tell. We last hear of him in 1561, living in the Jesuit house in Cuenca, interfering with its government and monopolizing a Jesuit brother to be his servant (Astráfn, *Historia*, volume 2 [1905], 132).

⁸ Perhaps Francis Borja, though his membership of the Society of Jesus would still, in 1549, have been secret.



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having looked at it carefully, and commended it to the Lord, you could do what you judged in the Lord was most appropriate for His divine service.

So, sir, my purpose was not to move you towards the Society if the Lord was not moving you, but rather—starting, as I say, from the idea that you were wanting to make the jump—to give you a hand. For in my own weakness, when the Lord was served by His giving me a flash of extra light, and when I was supposed to be escaping from that gutter of liberty (or rather, from captivity to the liberty which is obedience), my experience was of such great fears and resistances that I found myself from the top of my being to the bottom just saying ‘no’, full as I was of self-love. And since I couldn’t get rid of this, my concern was to find some way of responding to God without discontenting Eve (or at least what we inherit from Eve).⁹ On some occasions I was deciding to

⁹ An odd and unclear phrase. If the interpretation here is correct, Villanueva is rather strikingly echoing the second of the three Ignatian Classes in the Second Week, who ‘want to rid themselves of the attachment, but want so to rid themselves of it as to remain with the thing acquired, so that God should come where they want, and they do not decide to leave it in order to go to God’ (Exx 154).

spend the whole of my life in pilgrimage; other times to do hospital work. But when I thought I was open to many labours for Christ, still when I wanted to jump from the gutter of liberty into the earthly paradise of obedience, I would find a number of rebellious things that were keeping me back. When I examined all this well, I realised that what would remedy it would be if I disposed myself to die for him who died for me on the Cross.

I know, sir, what these medicines taste like, and how little strength there is in human nature for such a battle.¹⁰ Thus (as I said) I was not trying to do anything more than help you, and in this respect I do think I did you some service. Now that I know that you no longer have the intention you had then, I rejoice in the decision you did take, since I see that you are so pleasing to your Creator. And since the pleasure which service gives to Him is all the greater, the more conformed it is to the divine will, I believe that it is this will that is carrying you in what you will have decided. For without this guide, you cannot find peace and calm—you lack it, even if what you do is in itself good.

It remains, sir, for you there and us here to dig this vine, which will be very abundant, and to encourage each other in the one Lord. For my part, I will always hold you as a Father; we will rejoice together in the same Lord, and I will hold us as His sons. May He give us His grace that we might do His holy will. Amen.

From Plasencia, 12 January 1555,

Your servant,
Villanueva

¹⁰ Castro tells us that in Rome Villanueva went to the Jesuit house to discuss his vocation many times, 'and there were equally many other times when, on arrival at the door, some aversion (I don't know what) against our people that the devil placed within him would make him turn back' (Abad, 'Un centro de Ejercicios', part 1, 156-157).