

From the Ignatian Tradition

ON CONFUSION AND ON PRAYER

St Francisco Borja (1510–1572)

Juan Miguel Marín

IN HIS CLASSIC BOOK *The Jesuits, Their Spiritual Doctrine and Practice: A Historical Study*, Joseph de Guibert ponders a historical mystery involving the third Jesuit Superior General, St Francisco Borja, and his spiritual writings. De Guibert wonders why, unlike those of other Jesuit authors, Borja's meditations and prayers were not published until more than four centuries after his death.

We might ask why these meditations, almost complete in manuscript, were not published after Borja's death Were they found to be too imperfect? I would rather believe that their general tone and the whole orientation of these touching meditations was too severe, too full of the thought of penance and human misery.¹

Perhaps de Guibert based his not entirely accurate interpretation on Borja's idea of 'dealing with confusion by praying with Christ's suffering Humanity': that is, identifying his own human sufferings with those of Christ's passion, and then both of these with the sufferings of the people he encountered every day in ministry. But even in that case de Guibert would be leaving out the crucial context which gives us the missing element; after Christ's passion follows the resurrection.

Although not meant for publication, copies of Borja's meditations did circulate among his spiritual sons and daughters. As exemplified in the excerpts below, translated from his 'Brief Treatise on Confusion'

¹ Joseph de Guibert, *The Jesuits, Their Spiritual Doctrine and Practice: A Historical Study* (Chicago: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1972), 196 n. 34.

and ‘Spiritual Treatise on Prayer’, he often addressed the anonymous reader as *alma mia*, a term of endearment that literally means ‘my soul’. His writing ministry became for him one more way to follow Ignatius’ call ‘to help souls’.²

Borja wrote the two treatises in the 1550s, at the time when he became St Teresa of Avila’s Jesuit confessor.³ St Teresa credits Borja with sharing with her his idea of ‘praying with Christ’s suffering humanity’, strengthening her resolve to pursue mystical prayer, and nullifying the fears that some of her other confessors instilled in her. She contrasts him with those who suspected her mystical experiences to be demonically inspired:

After Father Borgia had listened to my account, he told me that my experiences definitely came from the spirit of God. ‘I see no reason for you to continue trying to push these gifts away’, he said. ‘I can see how this resistance has been an appropriate practice up to now, but it would be a mistake to continue it. The time has come to embrace all blessings. You should still begin each period of silent prayer by meditating on a phase of the Passion, but then if the Lord transports your spirit, you must let him take it. But you shouldn’t try to make this flight of the spirit happen on your own either.’

Since Father Borgia was so evolved, he knew the right medicine to give me and the advice that would be most useful. His counsel deeply consoled me.⁴

Borja encouraged her struggles in a racist and misogynist society—one that suspected her twice, first for being of ‘impure blood’, namely having Jewish ancestors, and secondly for being a woman, who was leading a community of other women living independently of men.⁵ He encouraged her to remain ‘indifferent’ to her situation, in the Ignatian

² Borja’s meditations have been collected in Francisco de Borja, *Tratados espirituales* (Barcelona: J. Flors, 1964).

³ Cándido de Dalmases, *Francis Borgia: Grandee of Spain, Jesuit, Saint* (St Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1991), 101.

⁴ *Teresa of Avila: The Book of My Life*, translated by Mirabai Starr (Boston: Shambhala, 2008), 179–180.

⁵ The recently published personal writings of Pedro de Ribadeneira, Borja’s and Ignatius’ first biographer, reveal that Borja took seriously Galatians 3: 28: ‘There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus’. According to Ribadeneira, he welcomed marginalised people, even more than his predecessors in the generalate. (Pedro de Ribadeneira, *Confesiones: Autobiografía documentada* [Santander: Sal Terrae, 2009], 203. See also Alison Weber’s excellent discussion, *Teresa of Avila and the Rhetoric of Femininity* [Princeton: Princeton UP, 1990].)

sense of *indiferencia*. If God brings her tribulations, she should welcome them as an opportunity for patience; if God brings her ecstasies, she should welcome them as an opportunity for joy.

Borja himself prayed using the methods he shared with Teresa. He often started by meditating on the wounds of Christ:

Consider how Christ opened his side to be our dwelling and our nest. Never a bird, no matter how much it loved its offspring, ever gave them its heart as nest, as Christ did. Considering the generosity of his side wound ought to move us to worship him and enter him with humility and charity. It was for this that he was opened.⁶

Here the future saint meditates intensely, gazing at Christ's suffering body. As a Jesuit, Borja learnt Ignatian spiritual practices of meditation in which he created sensorial, passionate compositions out of scenes from the Gospels, including himself as a character. His cherishing of medieval spirituality led him, too, to extend such sensoriality and passion to the mystical bridal language he found in the biblical Song of Songs and especially in the writings of women such as the thirteenth-century Franciscan laywoman Blessed Angela of Foligno.

Angela made devotion to Christ's wounds a highly influential practice in Catholic spirituality. Borja knew by heart all about her Franciscan spirituality and her experience of God. He integrated his ministerial and reading experiences into his Ignatian prayer, including that of teaching Jesuit novices the meditations found in the popular *Book of the Blessed Angela of Foligno*. Angela writes:



Angela of Foligno, by Gaetano Gandolfi

⁶ Francisco de Borja, 'Tratado espiritual de la oración' (1557), *Tratados espirituales*, 327.



St Francis Borgia Kneeling before the Body of Queen Isabella of Spain,
by Antonio Palomino

... while I was standing in prayer, Christ on the cross appeared more clearly to me while I was awake, that is to say, he gave me an even greater awareness of himself than before. He then called me to place my mouth to the wound in his side. It seemed to me that I saw and drank the blood, which was freshly flowing from his side. His intention was to make me understand that by his blood he would cleanse me⁷

Borja cherished passages such as this because he, like Angela, entered religious life to regain the joy he had lost after the death of a loved one.⁸ Indeed, his first encounter with death, gazing at the corpse of the once beautiful Queen Isabella of Spain, made him vow 'Never more, never more, will I serve a master who can die'.⁹

⁷ Angela of Foligno, *Complete Works*, translated by Paul Lachance (New York: Paulist, 1993), 128.

⁸ Borja, *Tratados espirituales*, 44.

⁹ For a discussion of this episode in Borja's life, see Dalmases, *Francis Borgia*, 15–18.

He sought refuge from sorrow in religious life, where he realised that ‘many of us cease to persevere in prayer because of the distress and exhaustion that we experience. This can be a result of discouraging and fatiguing the understanding.’ He overcame this problem having found that by contemplating Christ’s side wound and finding refuge in entering it, one could attain union with God.¹⁰

The wisdom he gained from his years of prayerful spiritual experience he shared with his fellow Jesuits, to whom he offered similar advice. For example, in his ‘Seven Meditations on the Seven Sources of Blood’ he suggests to his brothers who struggled with sexual desire and celibacy:

Seek the Lord, so that those wounds become medicine for your own, and your soul becomes a recipient for that blood so that you can offer it to the eternal Father, beseeching him for the gift of chastity.¹¹

Borja shares here and elsewhere insights gained through spiritual practice. He found that contemplating Christ’s bloody wounds, visualising himself entering and seeking refuge in them, helped him extinguish those misguided desires that made him restless.¹² Borja encouraged many similarly restless readers to join him as fellow contemplatives in action. Among such readers encouraged to meditate on Christ’s wounds we find ‘knights and busy people’.¹³

When Borja prayed with Ignatius’ exercises meditating on the three faculties of the soul (memory, will and understanding), he also followed St Augustine, linking them to the Holy Trinity. In his contemplation, ‘The Soul as Dwelling of the Three Divine Persons: On Being Moved by the Love of God’, he presents human love towards other persons as proceeding from the Trinity’s love towards each of the Three Persons. As a student of Augustine’s Platonic philosophy, Borja understood the goal in prayer as being swept up in divine *eros*. *Eros*—intense and

¹⁰ See Amy Hollywood, ‘“That Glorious Slit”: Irigaray and the Medieval Devotion to Christ’s Side Wound’, *Luce Irigaray and Premodern Culture: Thresholds of History* (London: Routledge, 2004), 105–125; ‘The Mystical Body: Religion, Postmodernity and Nostalgia’, *The Way Supplement*, 102 (Autumn 2001), 49–60; and ‘“Beautiful as a Wasp”: Angela of Foligno and Georges Bataille’, *The Harvard Theological Review*, 92/2 (1999), 219–236.

¹¹ Borja, ‘Siete meditaciones sobre las siete fuentes de sangre’ (c.1551–1561?), *Tratados espirituales*, 428.

¹² Borja reveals more of his restless life, and his prayer refuge, in his ‘Spiritual Diary’: see Manuel Ruiz Jurado’s introductory study to *San Francisco de Borja: Diario espiritual* (1564–1570) (Santander: Mensajero, 1997), especially 117–133.

¹³ Borja, ‘Ejercicio espiritual para caballeros y personas ocupadas’ (c.1551–1561?), *Tratados espirituales*, 412–414.

ecstatic love—involved a parabolical movement from divine to human that impelled the soul towards a burning embrace in the fire of God's love. He exhorts, 'allow yourself to be ignited in the fire of your Beloved and become as supple as burlap in order to be more easily burned'.¹⁴ Such an ignition of erotic desire for God begins with Ignatius' application of the senses, in which exercitants are asked to immerse themselves in the Gospels' narrative and identify themselves with the human and divine characters in a sensorial, affective, way: '... smell the fragrance and taste the infinite sweetness and charm of the Divinity, of the soul, of its virtues, and of everything there, appropriately for each of the persons' (Exx 124) As Borja adds in the 'Spiritual Treatise On Prayer', one should kindle desire for 'a beloved whom one is anxious to see, hear, taste and posses' in the same way as the psalmist: 'as a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God' (Psalms 42:1).¹⁵

Among the goals of Borja's writing ministry we thus find his sharing with the reader a refuge from the many anxieties that can be encountered in everyday ministerial life. He knew by experience that,

... those who want to recollect themselves in prayer must become labourers who returns home Whoever desires to enter the state of prayer must come home, tired from the works of the senses, exhausted from so much talking and so much looking and hearing in vain, afflicted by the understanding, and crushed by the appetites of the will¹⁶

He understands that anxiety can show up not only in active ministry but also in contemplative prayer. Even meditation with images and words can produce tension. Thus, he leads his audience from discursive prayer to a mystical approach that results in what he calls annihilation by means of *confusión*.

Borja describes *confusión* as a breakdown of the understanding. The understanding is like a clock demanding to be stopped because it 'is running too fast'.¹⁷ When life runs fast like this one must annihilate the self and die spiritually. Only then will one be created anew:

¹⁴ Borja, 'El alma morada de las tres divinas Personas: "Que haremos cuando somos movidos en el amor de Dios"', (before 1559), *Tratados espirituales*, 405.

¹⁵ Borja, 'Tratado espiritual de la oración', 359.

¹⁶ Borja, 'Tratado espiritual de la oración', 329.

¹⁷ Borja, 'Breve tratado de la confusión' (1550), *Tratados espirituales*, 160.

One of the things that hinder you, my dear, in finding the peace and love of the Beloved is when you stray away through the senses, spending too much time in seeing and in speaking

Now go to Christ, our redeemer and divine healer, and showing him in a handful your wounds, ask for compassion saying: ... I am asking you to rebuild what I have destroyed, write what I have erased, create anew what I have annihilated.¹⁸

One of the sources of agitation that he mentions is his experience of loss or tormenting desires. The turmoil of emotions needs to be addressed if he is to remain sane. His longing for peace brings memories of love, which he identifies as pointing towards Christ the Beloved. He realises that brooding over stressful situations only increases his suffering.

To attain peace one must first achieve annihilation by removing attachment to any created being (*ser*). In 'Soul of Christ, Exemplar' he urges the reader: 'Remove, remove, that being without being [*ser sin ser*], annihilate, annihilate that self [*ser*] of yours you held in such high esteem ...'.¹⁹ One does not attain this annihilation through knowledge; it is not possible, indeed, to attain annihilation through knowledge since the cognitive faculties required by knowledge will themselves have been annihilated. One does not even need any strenuous practice. On the contrary, all Borja suggests is to adopt Ignatius' prayer offering 'all my possessions, and myself along with them'

Take, Lord, and receive all my liberty, my memory, my understanding and all my will; all that I have and all that I possess. All this you have given me, Lord, and I return them to you (Exx 234).

For Borja, one attains annihilation through offering Christ's blood to the Father, that is, by sharing in 'the chalice of his Passion' as an Ignatian offering of the faculties to the Father. We can do so by offering those little sacrifices we are able to make every day. Serving those who need us the most, especially when they are not those we *want* to serve the most. Suffering with patience those little things that annoy us, showing compassion towards those who irritate us. '[F]or to serve you is to reign, to suffer for you is to rejoice.'²⁰

¹⁸ Borja, 'Breve tratado de la confusión', 158.

¹⁹ Borja, 'Dechado del alma de Cristo', (1551–1553), in *Tratados espirituales*, 231.

²⁰ Borja, 'Dechado del alma de Cristo', 227.

In this return to the Father one attains deification, that is, becoming divinised, not by being in the sense of Christ's divine 'hypostatic union, but by being [*siendo*] in the sense of loving union, a great gift since you will be [*ser*] one spirit with God'.²¹ Borja here has in mind 1 John 3:2–3,

Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is.

Thus we can suggest that mystical *confusión* serves as antidote to worldly confusion and leads to heavenly con-fusion—becoming one with God. The restlessness of the former arises when time is not taken to settle down and find a moment of respite in the latter's union with the Beloved. For Borja the desire to be 'annihilated' does not imply a suicidal tendency but a desire to return, rebuilt, to everyday ministerial life.

FROM ST FRANCISCO BORJA'S 'SPIRITUAL TREATISES'

Brief Treatise on Confusion²²

Concerning Obstacles in Prayer and How to Overcome Them

One of the things that hinder you, my dear, in finding the peace and love of the Beloved is when you stray away through the senses, spending too much time in seeing and in speaking. This can be a bad habit acquired in childhood, making it difficult to overcome. For this you will need good acts and from them acquire good habits. The other obstacle is even deeper and therefore more harmful. It arises out of the understanding's tending towards futile conceptualising. By means of this the understanding puts before the will harmful lures that make it stumble, when it should be illuminating the blind will in order to bring it to love that which is to be loved. It wastes time away in useless discourse, harming itself and destroying the will. Greater harm comes to us from the will which, when not disciplined, becomes attached to lower things, things that make restless the one who is attached to them. Since our affection is divided among many things, each of these takes control of the will, fighting it. If the wretched will saw itself, it would flee, as if from an enemy that is not desired by God.

²¹ Borja, 'Dechado del alma de Cristo', 231.

²² Borja, 'Breve tratado de la Confusión', 158–160.

Overcoming the Obstacles

When the obstacles are stronger it is more difficult to overcome them. The first way to do this is to recognise that, since you were at first part of the problem, or even the whole problem, when drawing to yourself all that afflicts you, you will now decide to be part of its conquering. At first you acted without the help of the Holy Spirit, who in kindness gives us the will and the means. Now go to Christ, our redeemer and divine healer, and showing him in a handful your wounds, ask for compassion saying: Lord this is what I am going to do. Here am I, do with me whatever needs to be done. I want to be yours because of who you are.

***I am asking
you to rebuild
what I have
destroyed***

I am asking you to rebuild what I have destroyed, write what I have erased, create anew what I have annihilated. Finally, bind me to you because my emotions have rebelled against me, agitating me. If your compassion does not come to my aid I will get lost in frenzy.

My dear, once you start to trust yourself again, decide to reorganize the disorder that has come through the senses. Because this lack of discipline began in childhood, return to this source and become like a child again in order to renew your senses. At that time you did not place enough importance on what was seen or heard so as to become attached. So now pay no attention to what is seen or heard until you have gained such discipline that what comes through the senses does not become an obstacle, but serves as fuel for burning yourself in divine love. If still attached to things, remember that you will die and that everything is impermanent. Remind yourself that nothing remains of what is past so that this will help you overcome these obstacles.

Another way of overcoming the harm caused by the understanding is to do what whoever finds a clock that is running too fast does. In order to set it right one must first stop it. So the first remedy for our understanding is to stop it, since it is a clock that runs by discoursing about things that are not and that never will be. And, even if they were, it is not up to the understanding to judge them or go after them. It is necessary to stop it so that it stays in the present moment, considering presently the kindness of the Lord and the ingratitude with which we sometimes receive it. When constantly thinking about our acts we should consider what we could lose in each of them. If we do not close ourselves to God with other thoughts we will see how God is

given to us in each moment. Oh, my dear, if you just left behind your thoughts and movements in order to let the Holy Spirit move you, without running fast or slow, how perfect would be the clock! May His divine compassion be with you.

Spiritual Treatise On Prayer²³

Perseverance in Prayer

Many of us cease to persevere in prayer because of the distress and exhaustion that we experience. This can be a result of discoursing and fatiguing the understanding, forcing it through steps and meditations, thinking that if everything is not perfect all effort will be lost. In this case it would be appropriate to say to the Lord what Peter said when fishing: 'Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing' (Luke 5:5). To avoid this inconvenience we can do the following when entering into prayer.

Those who want to recollect themselves in prayer must become like labourers returning home: feet, tired from walking, hands, from digging; bodies, drained by the day's work. They can only rest by leaving their tools behind, sitting down with their hands doing nothing, accepting a gentle moment of respite. In such a way whoever desires to enter the state of prayer must come home, tired from the works of the senses, exhausted from so much talking and so much looking and hearing in vain, afflicted by the understanding, and crushed by the appetites of the will

Tired I come, O Lord, but you became tired on the road so that I would be at ease. You wanted to be rest and serenity for us, give me the grace that I would be able to say: 'I will both lie down and sleep in peace' (Psalms 4:8). I have come to rest from the labours that Pharaoh forced me to do in Egypt. Because of them I am crushed, without feet, hands, or understanding. I am in need of having your mercy restore what my malice destroyed, in need of having you become my feet and my hands, the light of my understanding and the joy of my will. I will do what you work in me and say what I hear from you. In this way what I have done to hurt myself you will turn it into my benefit. It would be better to have you as my feet and my hands, serving you in

²³ Borja, 'Tratado espiritual de la oración', 329–331.

what is my duty, than doing whatever comes from my free will, because everything that I do and everything I have received belongs to you

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