



Saint Joseph de Clairval Abbey

Letter of January 6, 2014,
Feast of Epiphany of the Lord

Dear Friends,

IN December 1936, in his monastery alongside a very busy road and a railroad line that made all the walls shake, Brother Rafael Arnáiz Barón wrote a very humorous meditation titled, "Freedom." So many travelers coming and going at such speed! They think they are free. But "true freedom is often enclosed between the four walls of a monastery." Freedom, the Brother added, "is in the heart of the man who loves only God. It is in the man whose soul is attached neither to the mind nor to matter, but to God alone." During his canonization on October 11, 2009, Brother Rafael was put forward by Pope Benedict XVI as a young man who answered "'yes' to the call to follow JESUS, instantly and with determination, without limits or conditions." Given as a model for youth throughout the world, he was one of the Patrons of World Youth Day in Madrid in 2011.

Rafael was born on April 9, 1911 in Burgos, Spain, the eldest in a family of four children. Baptized the following April 21, he received confirmation when he was not quite three years old, and made his first communion on October 25, 1919. When he was nine, he entered a Jesuit school. His great sensitivity as well as his intellectual and artistic gifts revealed themselves at an early age. In January 1922, his family moved to Oviedo, and the boy entered the Jesuit school there. His great piety led him to join the committee in charge of the Solidarity of Saint Stanislaus. According to the Father Prefect of Studies, he was already seeking God, "as if he were magnetized by Him."

Of a lively temperament, Rafael lost his patience if he was not served quickly and efficiently. Little rumors in his circle greatly upset him. However, he never had disagreeable words for the house staff. He was very scrupulous about the cleanliness of his clothes and his personal affairs. Anything ugly, dirty, or crude, and vulgar stories or expressions were repugnant to him. When he travelled he brought along his boxes of pencils, and always returned with a large number of sketches and drawings of landscapes that, once finished, were stuffed into folders or given away.

An emotion that makes you think

In 1930, he began studying architecture in Madrid. He dreamed of drawing, of painting, of expressing on canvass and paper what his artistic soul conceived. He was also a musician. That year, during the vacation he spent with his Uncle Polin and Aunt María, the duke and duchess of Maqueda, he discovered the Trappist Abbey of San Isidro de Dueñas. (In the seventeenth century, Abbot de Rancé reformed the Cistercian abbey in La



Saint Rafael Arnáiz Barón

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Trappe, in Normandy, France. All the monasteries connected to it are called Trappist, and observe the Benedictine rule with particular austerity.) The evening he arrived at the monastery, Rafael felt an intense emotion while attending the Office of Compline: "Above all," he wrote to his uncle, "I heard a 'Salve Regina' that... God alone knows what I felt... It was something sublime." Six years later, returning to these first impressions, Rafael would say that the Lord used the impression made on his sensitivity to make him think. In 1931, he became a member of Catholic Action, and participated in Saint Vincent de Paul meetings and nocturnal adoration. His great piety did not keep him from being a first-class gastronome and being familiar with many restaurants. But in everyday life, he was not hard to please and ate whatever was offered to him. Brimming with an infectious liveliness, he was nonetheless deeply meditative at times.

In September 1931, during a stay at the Abbey of San Isidro de Dueñas, he wrote, "The Trappist lives in God and for God. God is the only reason for his existence in this world. How different from some so-called Christian souls, for whom God is secondary, to be dealt with from 8 AM to 9 AM and then abandoned until the same time the next day, and then again forgotten!" He later added, "The artist possesses a high degree of sensitivity, and so a Trappist monastery and the life of its monks makes an impression on him, as does a painting or a sonata. The artist who is Christian, who has faith, sees in the Trappist monastery something more than that. He sees

God in a palpable manner. He leaves strengthened in his faith and, if the Lord grants him the grace, he leaves knowing himself a little better and, alone with God and his conscience, he changes his way of thinking, his way of feeling things and, most importantly, his way of behaving in the world."

During the general audience of August 10, 2011, Pope Benedict XVI said, "These places [where monastic life is led] combine two very important elements for contemplative life: the beauty of creation, which evokes the beauty of the Creator, and silence, which is guaranteed by living far from cities and the great thoroughfares of the media. Silence is the environmental condition most conducive to contemplation, to listening to God and to meditation. ... God speaks in silence, but we must know how to listen. This is why monasteries are oases in which God speaks to humanity."

Everything turns out much better

In 1932-1933, Rafael performed his military service in the engineers, and then continued his studies in architecture. Living in Madrid, he set himself a precise schedule that included early morning Mass and an evening Rosary. He wrote to his parents: "I have noticed that when I place myself in God's hands at the beginning of the day, everything turns out much better." A documentary on Cistercian life, created for the occasion of the eight hundredth anniversary of the French abbey of Sept-Fons, confirmed the favorable impression he'd had during his visit to San Isidro, and led him to choose monastic life. While at the monastery over November 24 and 25, his request to enter was accepted.

In his eagerness to devote himself to the Lord, he wished to enter the monastery without taking leave of anyone, even of his parents, for he feared his heart's response. But the apostolic nuncio (the Pope's ambassador), to whom he had opened his heart, told him: "I think that you must say goodbye to your parents and receive their blessing." So Rafael spent the month and a half that remained before he entered the monastery with his family. He waited—not without profound interior suffering—until the Christmas celebrations had passed and, the afternoon of January 7, 1934, calmly declared to his mother, who was playing the piano: "Stop playing for a moment, I have something to tell you."—"What's happened? Tell me!"—"Mother," he began again with tears in his voice, "God is calling me... I want to leave for the Trappist monastery." She lowered her head and could only say "Son!" When his wife told him about it, Rafael's father, after a moment of barely perceptible emotion, blessed God, and then asked his son: "When do you want to go? I'll drive you." The date for his departure was set for January 15.

The young postulant adapted well to his new life. He believed he had achieved the aim of his aspirations and his vocation: "God has made the Trappists for me and

me for the Trappists... Now I can die happy, I am a Trappist!" But a few months later he suddenly developed diabetes. During the month of May, he lost twenty-four kilos in eight days and almost went blind. Forced to return to his family for proper treatment, he reluctantly left the monastery, hoping to be able to return. After receiving the initial care the disease requires, Rafael's health improved. He suffered from having to be immersed again in a life which he had had so much difficulty leaving. He himself would describe himself, when he returned to his home, as grumbling about his silence and meditation being ruined: "I believed I had to be a Trappist at home... How wrong I was... I was seeking myself in external recollection." Nevertheless, he began to smoke, play the violin, and paint again. On June 3, he wrote in a letter to his uncle Polin: "What is happening is very simple, and it is that, in the end, God loves me very much... At the monastery, I was happy, I considered myself the happiest of mortals, I had succeeded in freeing myself from creatures, and I sought nothing but God... But one thing remained—my love of the Trappist monastery. And JESUS, who is very demanding and jealous of the love of His sons, wanted me to detach myself from my beloved monastery, even if temporarily." Rafael quickly understood that his trial was leading him toward a greater freedom of heart.

God's judgment is near

In July, he wrote to his brother Cistercian novices: "You do not know what you have, and you will never be able to thank God enough for so great a blessing. I myself did not know until I was forced to return into the world... In their suicidal pride, men cry out: 'We do not need God!...' Our society has broken down, and cares about everything except for what is truly important. I tell you frankly—in seeing men so blind, one is filled with sadness, and wants to shout to them: 'Where are you going, you crazy, insane people? You are crucifying JESUS, this Nazarean who asked us to love one another!... Don't you see that you have taken the wrong path, that life is very short, and that we must take advantage of it, because God's judgment is near?' But it is useless. In the world, God and His judgments are no longer spoken of." Rafael understood that men can be freed from the shadows of spiritual death only by opening their hearts to Christ, who is the Light of the nations.

In January 1935, he went with his brother Leopold to the French border to pick up a car his father had bought. He wanted to be the first to drive it, and on this trip he didn't skimp on comfort and pleasures. But the attraction that life in the world still exerted on him did not keep him from writing to his Father Abbot several months later: "(My brother monks) believe perhaps that I have forgotten them, but one does not forget souls one loves in God. In loving them, one loves God, and loving Him in His creatures is a great consolation that takes nothing away from His glory."

The Blessed Virgin will cure you

In May 1935, Mercedes, Rafael's sister, was diagnosed with acute peritonitis, with no recovery possible. Rafael took close care of her, but suffered intensely from seeing her in this condition. On June 9, the sick girl was at the end of her strength and her ability to endure any more suffering. "Don't worry, my little sister," he told her, "I'm going right now to the church to tell the Blessed Virgin everything, so that she will free you and our mother from suffering. You'll have a good night—you'll see." Fifteen minutes later, he came back, smiling. "It's done. I spoke to the Blessed Virgin: 'See what you can do, Mother, for my Mom. Cure my sister.' Now you will see how the Blessed Virgin will cure you." After a last injection of morphine, the sick girl slept through the entire night. The pain stopped completely and, in a month, against all expectation, she gained back the twenty-five kilos she had lost.

But the desire for Trappist life still burned within the young man. Speaking of himself, he wrote to his uncle in December 1935: "His vocation is to want to be forgotten by the world and by creatures, so as to offer himself to God in the silence and humility of the oblate's habit. He wants to be an offering for God, but without the world knowing it; to be a shadow who passed his life loving God much and silently. He wants to help worldly souls to love God, but without their knowing it."

Thanks to his health being restored, Rafael was able to enter the monastery again on January 11, 1936. Since his diabetes kept him from following the Rule, he was received as an oblate, meaning he would not make public vows like the others. This was for him even more humbling, since his soul was greedy for the Trappist life with its penances, its work, and its rigor in the observance of the Rule. But he perceived being an oblate as a detachment from the Trappist vocation: "I do not deserve to be a monk... Saying the Holy Mass?... Lord, if I am to see you very soon, what does that matter?... Vows?... Do I not love God with all my strength? So what good are vows? Nothing prevents me from being close to Him and loving Him silently, humbly, in the simplicity of the oblation." He associated his state as an oblate with the mystery of Christ's Passion. However, his detachment from everything did not make him indifferent to others; he wrote his father: "I want to be a very human saint," and "love for God does not exclude that of creatures." To be able to be best cared for, Rafael was put in the infirmary. The former novice master had passed away, and his relationship with the new novice master was not an easy one. He experienced loneliness and misunderstanding, because some monks were scandalized by his exemptions from the Rule. Fortunately, he could rely on the Abbot and his confessor. In the beginning all went well with the nurse, young Brother Tescelino, but in fall 1936 the nurse was drafted, and his

replacement was much less understanding. Rafael himself admitted that he was not given enough to eat.

In July 1936, the Spanish Civil War began. Rafael was aware he did not know much about what was happening in Spain. Called up on September 29, he was declared unfit for military service. Many young monks were drafted into the army. Brother Rafael suffered to see his Brothers leave while he was discharged as unfit. After a stay with his family, who had taken refuge in a very quiet Castilian village, Brother Rafael returned to the monastery for the third time on December 6.

The hand of God

On February 7, 1937, Rafael left the monastery for a third time due to his deteriorating health. The war made it impossible for him to receive the care he needed in the monastery. On the occasion of this latest departure, he stated, "I see the hand of God so clearly that whatever happens is all the same to me." He returned to the Castilian village where his parents still were, and took up canvas and brush once more. He took walks in the country, conversed with the tenant farmers, took an interest in his father's country estate, spent long hours in the garden contemplating the sky, listened to music, and said the Rosary. But in the midst of a certain level of comfort, he found ways to mortify himself in many small things. His mother was his only nurse this entire time. Little by little, Rafael's health improved, but he was not cured of his disease. However he reached a new stage—from then on, he not only accepted but loved his circumstances, whatever they were.

Rafael felt on him the loving gaze of JESUS, calling him back to the monastery, and an interior battle took place in his soul because of the sufferings that awaited him. "The Lord," he confessed, "is greatly testing me with my illness, which makes me come and go without having a place to stop—now in the world, now in the monastery. It's something that one must experience to understand..." Several days later, Rafael told his mother: "Mother, I need to leave."—"Already, my son?" she replied, her heart wrung with anguish. It was the fourth time she would have to offer her son, and each time the pain was just as intense. "I must leave... Tomorrow I return to the monastery," Rafael declared. He went back to San Isidro on December 15. His farewell to his mother was simple but painful. Not seeing her husband getting ready, she asked Rafael: "Isn't your father going with you?"—"No. This time, I'm leaving alone."

Rafael wrote in his journal: "My vocation is only to love God, in sacrifice and renunciation, with no rule other than blind obedience to his Divine Will. I believe I am fulfilling it today, in obeying, without vows and as an oblate, the superiors of the Cistercian abbey of San Isidro de Dueñas..." Suffering physically and morally, he noted, "They do not know my vocation. If the world knew the continual martyrdom that is my life... If my

family knew that my center is not the monastery, nor the world, nor any creature, but God, and God crucified... My vocation is to suffer." From then on, he abandoned all his desires and renounced any official vocation. "I have realized what my vocation is. I am not a monk..., I am not a lay person..., I am nothing... Blessed be God, I am nothing but a soul in love with Christ."

Constantly loving God

At the beginning of Lent 1938, the Father Abbot informed him that he would give him the cowl, (the ultimate monastic habit, usually reserved for monks who have taken their vows), and the black scapular (until then, he had worn the white cope and scapular of the novice). At the moment, he was delirious with joy, but very quickly he responded: "I have seen clearly that, for me, this is vanity." His confessor would report that at this time in his life, he spent entire hours before the tabernacle, after which he would be transformed, his limpid gaze reflecting the fiery blaze of love that consumed him. Sometimes, as a diversion to his long hours of solitude that, despite everything, weighed on him, he would be given work to do, peeling potatoes, working in the chocolate factory, making blueprints or drawings for Father Abbot, or studying Latin. Nothing, however, could turn him away from his constant thought of

loving God. But the depth of his spiritual life was more visible to others than to himself. It seemed to him, in fact, that he was not making any progress. "Dearest JESUS, My God," he wrote on April 13, "I see, Lord, that I am doing nothing in your service. I am afraid of wasting my time... When will I begin, my JESUS, to truly serve you?... I am useless and sick." Addressing himself, he added, "Poor Brother Rafael!... Let it be enough for you to constantly purify your intention at every moment, and at every moment to love God. Do everything out of love and with love."

On Easter Sunday, April 17, 1938, the Father Abbot vested Brother Rafael with the black scapular and the monastic cowl. In his meditation that day, Brother Rafael wrote, "I would be lying if I said that today I did not allow myself to be carried away by vanity... JESUS alone fills up the heart and soul." Shortly before, he had written to a Trappist brother: "He who gives up everything gives up very little, for he gives up only that which he must one day (the day of his death) give up anyway, whether he wants to or not." On April 22, his father came to spend the day with him. Brother Rafael seemed fine. But on the 23rd, he took to his bed and suffered attacks of delirium, accompanied by intense pains. He died the morning of April 26, 1938, at the age of 27.

During his second stay at the Trappist monastery, Rafael discovered the deep meaning of monastic silence which becomes transformed into prayer: "People say that the silence in the monastery is sad," he would write... "There could not be a more wrong view... The silence there is the most joyous language that could be imagined... From the soul of the Trappist living in silence, who appears pitiable, bursts forth abundantly and unceasingly a glorious song of joy, full of love and joy to his Creator, to his God, to a loving Father who takes care of and consoles him..." On September 18, 2010, in Westminster Cathedral, Pope Benedict XVI reminded youth of the benefit of silence: "I ask you to look into your hearts each day to find the source of all true love. JESUS is always there, quietly waiting for us to be still with Him and to hear His voice. Deep within your heart, He is calling you to spend time with Him in prayer. But this kind of prayer, real prayer, requires discipline; it requires making time for moments of silence every day... Even amid the 'busy-ness' and the stress of our daily lives, we need to make space for silence, because it is in silence that we find God, and in silence that we discover our true self." Let us ask the Most Blessed Virgin MARY to teach us to seek God in the silence of our heart.

Dom Antoine Marie o.s.b.

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