

## Second Book

### On obedience to your spiritual father, on excessive fervour, and on interior and exterior discipline

#### Chapter 1

##### To overcome the deceits of the enemy the best strategy is to submit to your spiritual father

(1) It's vital to choose a guide experienced in the interior life as God doesn't wish to do for everyone what he did for St Catherine of Siena: that is to say, immediately take them by the hand to show them the mystical way. If a guide is necessary to teach us the ways of nature, how much greater is the need for a teacher in the ways of grace? And if we need one for exterior and worldly matters, won't our need for one be greater for interior and hidden concerns? If we need one for moral, scholastic and descriptive theology, which are obviously taught, won't we need one even more for mystical knowledge, which is secret, hidden and obscure? And if we need one to instruct us in our dealings with people, and for political affairs, won't we need one for our interior dealings with God?

(2) A guide is also necessary to resist and overcome the deceits of the devil. St Augustine gave many reasons why God ordained that luminaries of the faith, and people of similar calibre, should preside over his Church. The main reason was to protect us from the deceits of the enemy, because if we were to allow our own judgment to guide our actions, we would be stumbling by the minute and fall headlong into the abyss, as happens to heretics and the arrogant. If we were to have angels for teachers, they would throw light on the demons who would be transformed into angels of light. But it was God's wish to give us people like ourselves as guides and counsellors. And if the guide is experienced, then he will know all about the subtle deceits of the devil which, being of little substance, disappear as soon as they're brought to light.

(3) Before choosing your guide you must think carefully and pray, because it's a very serious matter and must come from God. Once you've chosen him, however, you should stick with him, except in very exceptional circumstances, such as his inability to understand the paths along which God is leading you, because nobody can teach what they don't know, which is the first rule of philosophy.

(4) And if he doesn't understand spiritual matters, as St Paul says, (1Cor.2:14), it's a question of ignorance, because these have to be understood from a spiritual point of view, and the guide won't have the experience. But the experienced guide sees everything clearly and takes things as they stand. Lack of experience on the guide's part, then, is the principal reason for leaving him and choosing another, because without this experience you won't improve.

(5) Advice is unnecessary to move from a poor position to a good one, but time, prayer and advice are required to move from a good position to the best, because not everything that is best in itself is best for the individual. And neither is everything that's good for one person good for everyone. Some are called to the ordinary and exterior way, others to the interior and extraordinary, and not everyone is at the same level, as the mystical ways are many and varied. Nobody can take a single step along these hidden, interior paths without an experienced guide, because instead of walking straight you will be faced with the precipice.

(6) When you walk in dread along your chosen road and want to be completely free of fear, obedience to an experienced guide is the safest path, because with his interior light he's able to discern clearly what is temptation and what is inspiration. He can also distinguish those interior activities that spring from nature, from the devil, and from you yourself, so you must give your allegiance to someone experienced who can lay bare the attachments, petty idolatry, and bad behaviour that hinder your progress. In this way not only will you free yourself from the deceits of the devil, but you will travel more in one year than you will in a thousand with an inexperienced guide.

(7) The illustrious Father John Tauler tells the story of how the lay person he helped on the road to perfection was disillusioned with the world and keen to become a saint, and had undertaken a lengthy fast, until when he was asleep one night, sick and debilitated, he heard a heavenly voice say to him: "You self-willed man: if you kill yourself before your proper time, you will have cause to regret it." Filled with terror he went off to the desert and told an anchorite about his abstinence and the path he was following and the anchorite, guided by heaven, disabused him of his grievous error. The lay person told

him he was abstaining to please God, and when questioned as to whose advice he was following, he said nobody's, and was told it was an obvious temptation from the devil. His eyes were opened at this point and he saw the error of his ways, and from then on lived according to a guide's advice. He himself then maintained that the guide gave him more light than all the books that had been published.

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## Chapter 2

### Continuation

(8) It's a great advantage to have a teacher of the mystical way instead of books on spirituality, because the practical teacher can tell you what you must do as he goes along, whereas you might read something unsuitable and so miss vital instruction. Additionally, you can acquire a lot of false notions from books on mysticism, leading you to believe you have something you don't really possess, and to think you're more advanced on the mystical way than is the case, which gives rise to a great deal of risk and harm.

(9) One thing for certain is that the frequent reading of mystical texts that have no foundation in practical experience and that are purely speculative, does more harm than good, as they confuse people rather than shedding light. Moreover, such books fill people with ideas that bewilder them because although they contain information about spiritual matters, this comes from outside sources and dulls the senses rather than purifying them for God to take their place. Many people read this speculative literature continually as they don't want to submit themselves to someone who can show them the light. Certainly, if they do submit themselves to an experienced guide, he won't allow this reading, which means they would then progress and not bother with it. You will gather from this that to have an experienced guide who is able to lead and instruct from actual experience, so that you're not misled by the devil and your own judgment, is a source of great comfort and serenity. Not that the reading of spiritual texts in general is to be frowned upon, because in this case we're talking about people who are purely interior and mystical, for whom this book is intended.

(10) All the saints and mystical teachers agree that the safety of the mystically inclined person is best served by submitting wholeheartedly to a guide. As proof of this I would refer you to some words that God spoke to Doña Marina de Escobar. She relates how when she was ill she asked God if she should stay silent and not tell her spiritual father about the extraordinary things that were going through her mind, so as not to bother him. And God replied: "It isn't a good

idea not to tell your spiritual father, for three reasons. First, just as gold is purified in the crucible, and just as the value of precious stones is known by submitting them to the assayer, so too will you be purified and your true value known by submitting yourself to God's minister. Second, to avoid mistakes it's appropriate that matters should be governed by the order that God has taught through his Church, holy scripture, and the doctrine of the saints. Third, the compassion that God shows to his servants and to purified souls should not be concealed but revealed to his Church, to encourage the faithful to serve God and for God to be glorified through them."

(11) She adds the following words: "In keeping with this truth, when my confessor fell ill and instructed me not to tell everything to the confessor acting on his behalf, but only part of it, I complained to God that I had no one with whom to unburden myself. God replied: "You now have someone to make good the failings of your own confessor, so tell him everything that's happening to you." I replied to this: "No, Lord, not that, Lord." "Why not?" God asked. "Because my confessor has told me not to tell him everything, and I have to obey him." God replied to me: "I'm glad you've given me this answer, and I told you what I did to hear you say it. Do as you were told and tell him a just a few things as you were instructed." "

(12) What St Teresa said about herself is also very much to the point: "Whenever God instructed me to do something, if my confessor said something else, God would speak again and tell me to obey him. Then God would change the confessor's mind, so that he would come back and tell me to do the opposite." (Life, Ch 26). This is the sound and reassuring teaching that keeps at bay the deceits of the devil.

## Chapter 3

### Excessive fervour and love for others can hinder interior peace

(13) There's no sacrifice more pleasing to God (says St Gregory) than a person's burning zeal to help others. Our eternal father sent his son, Jesus Christ, to the world to carry out this ministry, and ever since it has counted among the most noble and sublime of callings. But if the zeal is excessive, it's a notable hindrance to the ascent of the spirit.

(14) As soon as you're newly filled with the light of fervour then you will want to use it for other people's benefit, and you then run the great risk that what appears to be pure enthusiasm is your own self-love. This zeal perhaps usually comes disguised as excessive enthusiasm, empty self-indulgence, busy affectation, and love of self, all inimical to your peace of mind.

(15) It's never a good idea to love others to the detriment of your spiritual welfare. To please God with simplicity should be your only objective and concern; try to moderate excessive fervour so that tranquillity and interior peace may reign in your soul. Real enthusiasm should express itself as pure love for God, which is genuine and effective love, and a love that works miracles in you, albeit very softly.

(16) In the first instance St Paul encouraged concern for our own soul rather than for others: "Keep a close watch on yourself and your teaching," he said in his epistle (1 Tim. 4:16). Don't strain yourself to make progress, however, for when the time is right and you can be of some help to others, God will help you and give you a suitable task. This worry is God's alone while your job is to rest in tranquillity, detached and completely resigned in God. Don't think you're idle in this state; those who concentrate on doing God's will in all things are doing a great deal. And those who attend to themselves for God's sake do all they should, because one act of complete resignation is worth more than a hundred, or even a thousand, exercises of your own volition.

(17) Although the cistern can contain a lot of water, it will never do so until the sky fills it with rain. Stay quiet, blessed soul, stay quiet, humble and resigned in everything God has in mind for you. Leave

the worry to God, because like a loving father he knows what's best for you. Act in total conformity with God's will, where perfection resides, for those who act according to his will are the mother, son and brother of the son of God himself.

(18) Don't think that God appreciates more those who do most. The one who is loved more is the one who is most humble, faithful and resigned, and most responsive to God's interior inspiration and divine will.

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