

## 1. My New Commission

Monastery of San Gerónimo el Real, Madrid,  
Seventh day of January in the Year of Our Lord, 1616.

I did not ask for this commission, I do not want it and yet, here I am. I still do not understand what has persuaded me or whether, having agreed to carry it out, I have committed an act of wisdom or folly. It certainly appears to be an act of advancement, as I now find myself in this majestic office, a privilege granted by my new superiors.

I confess, such grandeur does not reassure me: high-ceilinged, oak-panelled, this room is graced with fine, broad windows that frame a pleasing view of the monastery’s walled orchard to the east and open countryside beyond. If I crane my neck I can glimpse the meadows around the convent of Atocha in the distance, to the south. A few days ago, when I received the sudden order to come to Madrid I was sure that Our Lady of Atocha was my destination, that being a renowned hermitage and place of refuge for troubled, and troublesome, Dominican friars.

Instead, I find myself lodged in one of the most important monasteries of the kingdom, enjoying the hospitality of those illustrious Hieronymites, gentleman monks who are famed for their table, their herbarium and their skilled apothecaries; and, of course, for their intimacy with the king. I am told he is a frequent visitor to the royal apartments adjoining the eastern wing of the chapel, that he might hear Mass through the wall of his chamber. Of course, I do not expect to see him, my own living and working quarters being perched high above the western cloister. But at last, I am at the centre of things – a great reversal of fortune for a simple Dominican novice master with a suspect past and no future.

“Take heart,” Fray Boniface advised me three years since, when first I arrived in the obscure little convent of San Salvador, fresh from the humiliation of being voted from my professorship by my own students. I still choose to believe that they were browbeaten, bullied and bought by certain of my colleagues in Salamanca. For reasons which I am determined to forget.

“At least they did not throw you in gaol, as they did Luis de León.”

But Fray Luis de León had actually broken the law when he translated the Bible directly from Hebrew into the Spanish tongue. And it was reckless of him to have distributed his own version amongst his students. However superior to St. Jerome’s twelve-hundred-

year-old translation it may have been – and I am prepared to believe that it was – Jerome’s is still the single version authorised by the Council of Trent, whose lengthy deliberations sought to recover the authority stolen from our Mother Church by heretics such as Luther. The decrees of the Council were devised not only to root out wrongdoing and abuse, but to guarantee consistency of dogma and practice.

So. One Bible. One translation. One story.

Still, at least Fray Luis de León got out in the end and regained his position at the university, which I never will.

Such recollections unsettle me, reminding me that I, too, am risking much in committing these thoughts to paper, all the more that they are in the Spanish tongue. Even so, it is a great comfort to set down these words in my own voice, in my native Castilian, to indulge in the nuances and flourishes that are so alien to the precise, arid Latin I am obliged to use every day. Perhaps it is simpler than that: no more than a small rebellion, in private defiance of the discourtesy I have endured from Prior Ortiz since my arrival. It seems that I, a former professor of Theology, from one of the oldest universities in Europe, am hardly deserving of good manners; and that any questions I might pose concerning my commission are regarded as little more than an impertinence.

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“Excellencies.” I cleared my throat, not yet sure how I should address my new colleagues: the Archbishop, small and squat, seated behind an enormous carved desk; his companion, Prior Ortiz, tall and angular, standing to one side. “Without a clearer idea of the purpose and the intended readership for this study, I fear I may not be in a position to draw conclusions and make my recommendations with the confidence and authority you will require.”

Ortiz actually snorted in response. “We are the readership, Fray Martín. Archbishop Crespo, whom you see here, and myself. No one else.”

I raised my eyebrows. I know, and he knows, that Crespo, as a diocesan Archbishop, has no formal authority over me, a friar of the Dominican Order. Nor, for that matter, does Ortiz himself, who is prior of a Carmelite convent somewhere in the kingdom of Toledo, I believe. We are all three of us guests of the Hieronymites. The thought that neither Ortiz nor Crespo belong here any more than I do emboldened me.

“And the form of conclusions, recommendations...” I persisted.

“Recommendations? We are not interested in your opinions, Fray Martín. Keep to the facts.”

At that, Archbishop Crespo looked up from his desk and surveyed me with interest. He could not have failed to notice the flush that crept over my neck and face, accompanied, as always, by my silent cursing of this fair skin, which unfailingly reveals my feelings, my distress. I reminded myself that perhaps it was not so, that Crespo might just as easily have observed anger in my burning cheeks and glittering eyes, as the shame I struggled to conceal. I refused to meet his gaze and instead lowered my own, pondering the faded spirals and lozenges traced on the carpet where I stood – for they had not invited me to sit – its many worn and threadbare patches a testimony to extreme costliness and great age, the intricate work of Arab craftsmen, their descendents now gone from our land. Evidence, if any were needed, that great learning, art, even piety, are as nothing before the imperatives of power.

Still, one consequence of the expulsion of our Arab and Jewish brethren is the continued existence of the Holy Office of the Inquisition, bloated by an endless supply of cases: investigations into Arab and Jewish families whose forefathers had elected to convert to Christianity – their only recourse if they wished to remain in the country. Many of the *conversos*, strangely enough, being rich merchants accused of practising their old Jewish ways in secret, of corrupting good Christians. So, a threat to the state. Of course, the Inquisition is permitted, indeed required, to confiscate the assets of the guilty, so the richer they are, the better.

Ortiz has a cousin who is a Procurator Fiscal of the Tribunal of the Holy Office in Toledo. I must remember this.

I looked up suddenly and, in anticipation of the request I was about to make, took a single, not very decisive, step forward. Immediately, the air in the room was charged with tension. Ortiz actually flinched. Perhaps it is true that the slightest of our external actions can produce an internal metamorphosis that is communicated to others without our willing it. Perhaps he, or more likely Crespo, had perceived the conflicting responses warring within me since I had been summoned to appear before them: gratitude, though reluctant, at my apparent elevation; anger that my own Dominican superiors had so easily seconded me to the Carmelites for this as yet ill-defined task, as though my services in the convent of San Salvador were so easily dispensable. At that moment, in spite of my vow of obedience, anger was gaining the upper hand.

“I would like to have my associate Fray Boniface named as my secretary. There is also an old assistant of mine from the university, Diego Constán...”

Ortiz did not trouble to waste his breath on pleasantries. “Absolutely not. No secretary. And personal servants are out of the question.” There was nothing to be gained by correcting him. Diego was not my servant. Rather, he was attached to the university in some undefined capacity, charged with tasks the regular servants could not or would not perform. He did me a great service. I am in his debt.

Even now, I am unsure how far my vow of obedience obliges me to take on this commission. Perhaps a confrontation with my Dominican superior in San Salvador would be preferable to my current situation.

Crespo surveyed me. He had read my thoughts and for some reason decided that sullen acquiescence on my part would not suffice. “You will have no need of such services, Fray Martín. All reports, all notes are for our sight only,” he stressed, the gravity of his deep, resonant tones softened by the hint of a smile that carved furrows around his hooded, deep-set eyes, their whites tinged an unhealthy yellow. “Informal, rather than formal, nothing to labour over. But in your own hand. And in Latin.”

Lest my musings be found by some servant or peasant, no doubt. As though written Spanish would be any more comprehensible to our servants and peasants than written Latin. In truth, I have no need of a secretary nor of a servant, but I should like to repay Diego, whose loyalty and cleverness saved me from a dungeon in one of the many gaols of the Inquisition. Or worse. But it appears that I must bide my time.

“And my queries concerning the terms of reference?” I glanced at Ortiz. His long, bony face was pale as milk, his thin lips pursed. It was his turn to examine the carpet. Crespo ignored him and leaned towards me, arms extended over his desk, palms raised, as though to invite my embrace. The folds of skin around those hooded eyes crinkled once more and this time, the smile reached his lips.

“Fray Martín, you have raised some reasonable questions. We do have need of the disinterested eye of an outsider, yet one whose work is renowned for precision and intellectual rigour.”

I answered with a half-smile, which I hoped conveyed graciousness rather than gratitude.

“You are perhaps not aware that some initial research concerning the life of Fray Juan and the miracles attributed to him has already been conducted quietly during the past ten or twelve years,” he said.

I was not. But this intelligence did not surprise me. During the last decade, numerous visits from Vatican Inspectors have been occupied with investigations into the

life of Teresa, in preparation for her beatification, which took place last year. That a similar process should be set in motion for her most famous associate and friend, considered by many a saint in his own lifetime, is to be expected. Yet, none of this explains my presence here.

“Your Grace. If such searches have been carried out already, I do not understand the need for another investigation. Are you not asking me to repeat a task that has already been completed? One which the Vatican Inspectors will no doubt conduct again, on their own account, when the preparations for Fray Juan’s beatification commence?”

Crespo’s eyes swivelled away from me and fastened on Ortiz’s face. For a moment, no one spoke. I heard my own breath ebbing and flowing like a tide. Crespo’s basalt gaze returned to my face where, for a few uneasy moments it rested. At last he nodded. “You are quite right. Up to a point. Nevertheless, you know the kind of thing they look for.”

I do indeed. Miracles. Evidence of sanctity. A certain kind of background, proper to those considered pious. Thus are the lives of the saints made qualitatively different from the lives actually lived by the men and women who become saints. Certain traits, events, subjected to a little embellishment. Others, such as a stain on *limpieza de sangre*, quietly ignored. Yet who can make claim to absolute purity of blood, when half of the royal courtiers have at least one Jewish grandparent? Not Teresa. Not even Torquemada, my fellow Dominican, Isabella’s first Grand Inquisitor.

While Crespo continued to study me, I distracted myself with these and other thoughts, determined that I would not allow him to discomfort me further. After a time, though it may only have been a matter of moments, he planted his palms on the desk and lumbered to his feet, those sharp little teeth bared in a semblance of a smile. Crespo’s smirks perturb me far more than Ortiz’s scowls.

“Prior Ortiz will furnish you with the witness testimonies that have been gathered informally during the last thirteen years. Much of this material requires clarification and verification. It also needs to be edited and summarised, to provide a resource for the Vatican Inspectors when they arrive at the beginning of next year. At the moment the files are in some – disarray.”

One Bible. One version. One story. Is that what Ortiz and Crespo are about?

“We believe that your status as an outsider to our Order, your long experience of research, of languages and theology, equip you uniquely for this rather complex task.”

“Will my investigations be based purely on this documentary evidence?”

Ortiz shook his head vigorously and two pink stains appeared high on his papery cheeks. Perhaps he was annoyed at being silenced. “There is as yet no certainty concerning the veracity of these testimonies, or that they constitute evidence at all. Therefore, we will furnish you with a list of witnesses, carefully selected, who will be able to assist you in reaching a judgement concerning the reliability of the facts presented, in filling in any gaps and summarising the whole in a useful manner.”

So. It seems that they do want my opinion after all.

“There is also the question of Fray Juan’s papers,” Crespo added as an afterthought. “You know that he was an accomplished poet.”

And a famous one. His writings are already widely known and admired in Spain and even beyond. France, Italy, England, Portugal. I believe I may have read one or two of his poems. As far as I recall, I thought them rather strange.

“The originals have never been found. He was known to have recited some from memory and his words were often transcribed as he spoke. It is certain that notebooks also exist – or existed – although these have never come to light. Likewise, his other personal papers: letters, minutes of meetings – he held many positions of importance in the Discalced Carmelite Order, the reformed branch of the Carmelites which, as you know, he helped to found. It is known that he also wrote instructions on spiritual guidance for the sisters and lay persons he confessed. Commentaries on his poems. That sort of thing. They could all be relevant.”

Relevant to what? And for what purpose? As I pondered these questions, a heavy, expectant silence descended. Raindrops pattered on the window behind Crespo’s desk, glittering like little jewels in the low winter sun. My own shallow breath ebbed and flowed as the two continued to regard me, both frowning in concentration, as though gauging my willingness to support their endeavours.

Did I make some sign of assent? A nod, a smile? I must have done so, for at a certain instant the tension broke, Crespo waddled out from behind his desk, arms extended to receive my embrace, while Ortiz continued to intone instructions, insisting upon the need for discretion and circumspection in all matters concerning the investigation. Though how he can expect hermetic silence when thirty-one witnesses will be summoned, I do not know.

“We must remember that Fray Juan de la Cruz is at present one of the most venerated men of the Church in all of Spain. Perhaps a little too much so,” he added softly, “given that the Church has, as yet, accorded him no official sanction.”

Despite my distaste for the man, I understood his argument. In the absence of the formal blessing of the Church, such devotion on the part of the common people may fall into practices that are little short of idolatry, most difficult to control and almost impossible to stamp out. I said as much.

“Not only amongst the poor,” Ortiz agreed, sourly. “The king himself insisted on having a part of Fray Juan’s finger when the remains were on the way to Segovia. Or rather, the remains of the remains,” his lips curled in a sneer, “of what was left, after his devotees had got hold of the body. Which wasn’t much.”

I had heard this story before, about the king and Juan’s finger, but had always thought it a yarn. So his reputation for piety really had reached so high, in spite of the resistance, the scorn – the hatred, even – unleashed on him by some of the princes of the Church and by many of his fellow friars. Already I had learned something curious, even though my work had barely begun.

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As part of my office furnishings, there is now in my possession a large desk, ancient and worn, scarred with many scratches and stained with the ink of a multitude of other owners. It boasts several compartments of irregular size and it would not surprise me if one of them concealed a secret space where my private papers might be stored. But I believe in not settling for the obvious solution. I must survey this entire room, and also my sleeping quarters, in search of a place where I might conceal my own confidential documents.

Against the far wall, beneath the east-facing window, stands an ancient oaken chest. I am sure it was not there yesterday. I approach, crouch, run my hands across the pockmarked lid. Though badly worn, it is a fine piece, edged with a delicate interlay carved in the intricate *mudéjar* style of Arab craftsmen and embellished with an ornate brass handle. I prise it open.

Dust rises from a jumble of parchments and papers, some carefully numbered and ordered but most in disarray: loose pages covered in tiny handwriting, letters, accounts, scraps of prayers and lists, all written in different inks, only a few gathered into rough, random bundles. Obviously, these are not Fray Juan’s personal papers – rather, they are the confused records of fragmented inquiries conducted with neither method nor design, over a period that spanned more than a decade. I will need at least a month to sift through this muddle. Also, I may have found the hiding place for my personal papers.

But I suspect that Ortiz is right. The reality of Fray Juan’s life, his works, miracles and death, will not emerge from the mass of papers crammed into this fine chest. The evidence contained herein, if evidence it be, will lead me only so far. Then it will be time to take to the road. I have barely one year to accomplish the entire task. Whatever the wider intention of this work may be – a purpose which eludes me still – this is an opportunity, and a handsome one. I must be sure to make the most of it.