

The spirituality of Francisco de Osuna in context— notes from Mary Gile’s introduction to *The Third Spiritual Alphabet* by Francisco de Osunaⁱ

In a historical context - Francisco de Osuna was born about 1492 to a family serving under the powerful patronage of the counts of Urena, and named after his birthplace the town Osuna in southern Spain in the province of Seville. He began training for the priesthood at a young age and professed as a member of the Friars Minor of the Regular Observance. As a friar and priest he would have been a student of the humanities, theology and philosophy. Francisco's ministry included regular preaching and writing and this work took him from Spain to other European cities - Toulouse, Lyon, Paris and Antwerp and probably Rome.

He lived during the early period of sixteenth-century mysticism in Spain which was characterised by an extraordinary recovery and assimilation of the teaching of the ascetic and contemplative writers from the early patristic tradition and later European mystics both Catholic and Protestant. During this critical early stage there was also a lively mix of influences from the Platonic tradition and Islamic writings. The first half of the sixteenth century was a period of religious renewal and reform that touched the lives not only of priests, friars and nuns, but also lay people in Spain.

A Franciscan spirituality - As an Observant, Francisco belonged to the main branch of the Franciscan rule and lived a communal life passionately dedicated to prayer and meditation, the practice of poverty and charity. As a Franciscan he was nurtured in the devotion to the Sacred Humanity - and therefore meditated at length on the gospel accounts of the passion of Jesus Christ. In prayer, the Franciscans emphasized the role of the will more than that of understanding, and encouraged a spontaneous and simple prayer of the heart.

An eclectic spirituality - Francisco combined elements of Franciscan spirituality, the affective way of the heart, with the Augustinian philosophy of love. The Augustine way stressed that oneness between God and humanity is the essential starting point for spiritual life and that this communion or friendship is possible for all people. In his synthesis Francisco sees mystical theology and mystical experience as a harmony of

love and understanding, of the will and the intellect. He anticipates a Carmelite theology with its emphasis on going beyond dependence on sensory awareness and the inner work of emptying the heart to become free from limiting compulsions and over attachments.

A prolific writer on prayer - Francisco formulated maxims as memorable and pithy guides for meditation which he arranged alphabetically. These six alphabets created the structure for his series of treatises, each alphabet following a different spiritual theme - the passion, prayer and ascetic practices and most notably, the practice of recollection. Francisco wrote his treatises to correct and clarify the controversy about the nature of prayer - between a false 'illumination' and true mysticism. His third Alphabet enjoyed great popularity in the 16th century and was published in several editions. This alphabet describes in detail the complex psychological processes of recollection and offers advice and signs of progress along the way. His language is often warm and simple, using original and often charming images from ordinary life.

A pastoral response to controversy - Some Franciscan houses practiced *recogimiento* (recollection) in prayer while others favoured *dejamiento* (abandonment). The practice of *dejamiento* was controversial because it carried with it some of the negative associations of excess of a spiritual movement named the *alumbrados* which was being investigated by the Inquisition for its orthodoxy. In his teaching on recollection Francisco was at pains to avoid the passive quietism that denied any role for reason. Recollection is primarily affective, but rigorous intellectual reflection on the inner process is necessary to support it.

He also took a clear stance against the extremes of the *alumbrados* who saw their experience of enlightenment as beyond the constraints of moral conscience and the practice of virtue. As a pastor Francisco was well aware of the room for confusion about prayer. In his prologue he says '*Many have erred not because they followed recollection but because they thought they did so when in fact, unmindful of the writings of saints that could have helped them avoid error, they strayed from the path onto other somewhat pleasant little ways.*'ⁱⁱ

A precursor of and influence on Carmelite writers. The extent of

Francisco de Osuna's influence on Teresa of Avila and St John of the Cross is a subject of much scholarly enquiry. It is difficult to make specific claims, but in style, imagery and in content there are many likenesses. Teresa spoke clearly of her reliance on the third alphabet as a guide for the practice of prayer from an early stage of her life as a religious. She was given the book to read by an uncle sympathetic to her need. It was a timely gift and Teresa spoke of how she began to follow the path of recollection. She went so far as to say that the book was 'her master'. It was a guide through the intensities of her religious experience and at a later stage a resource for her teaching others the practice of recollection.

Both De Osuna and St John inherited ideas and language from the contemplative tradition they shared, but St John in coming after would at the very least have benefited from the clarity and precision of De Osuna's teaching on the *via negativa*. Other scholars see in De Osuna a vital intermediary in the development of Spanish Mysticism through whom the ancient science of love was carried through to both Saint Teresa and Saint John of the Cross.

Spirituality for all - Francisco wrote for people in all stations and circumstance in life insisting that friendship and communion with God are possible, certain and open to all. In his dedication of the third Alphabet to a secular Lord and Duke he points out that spiritual matters and virtuous deed are 'common property' - they belong to whoever loves them. By the same token the grace of recollection already belongs to all who learn to love it. He says: what we love '*is ours through love.*'ⁱⁱⁱ

A common practice - De Osuna emphasises that recollection is not only a gift received but something we participate in with others. It is a process of prayer which ascends from lower stages of recollection to higher or deeper ones. In her introduction Mary Giles sums up:

'For Osuna, recollection is prayer: It includes vocal prayer, to the extent that mental concentration is employed: mental prayer; and, more importantly, passive prayer. Given the ideal of one's total life being lived out in conformity with God's will, recollection is our *constant alertness and receptivity to God*, punctuated by moments of intense awareness of the divine, *moments when recollection becomes immediate, experiential union* between creature and Creator and *wisdom is poured into the soul* without our understanding how and whence'.^{iv}

ⁱ De Osuna, Francisco. *The Third Spiritual Alphabet*. The Classics of Western Spirituality Series. Transl. and intro. by Mary E Giles. 1981. Paulist Press, New Jersey.

ⁱⁱ Prologue to the Third Spiritual Alphabet, Francisco de Osuna, 1981 Paulist Press, page 38

ⁱⁱⁱ In the dedication to the Third Part of the Book called *The Spiritual Alphabet*, Francisco de Osuna, page 35

^{iv} Giles, Mary, 1981 Paulist Press, page 29