

they can raise themselves up; and instead of advancing they slip backward, as I have said.²² So experience and discretion are necessary in all matters. May the Lord in His goodness give them to us.

Chapter 23

Returns to the account of her life, of how she began to seek greater perfection, and by what means. For persons trying to guide souls that practice prayer it is helpful to know how these souls must proceed in the beginning. How she profited from knowing about this.

1. I now want to return to where I left off about my life,¹ for I think I delayed more than I should have so that what follows would be better understood. This is another, new book from here on—I mean another, new life. The life dealt with up to this point was mine; the one I lived from the point where I began to explain these things about prayer is the one God lived in me—according to the way it appears to me—because I think it would have been impossible in so short a time to get rid of so many bad habits and deeds. May the Lord be praised who freed me from myself.

2. Now, then, when I began to avoid occasions and devote myself to prayer, the Lord, as one who desired, so it seemed, that I be willing to receive them, started to grant me favors. His Majesty began to give me the prayer of quiet very habitually—and often, of union—which lasted a long while. Since at that time other women had fallen into serious illusions and deceptions caused by the devil,² I began to be afraid. I experienced wonderful delight and sweetness, and often without being able to avoid it, and in addition I was aware of the greatest assurance that this delight was from God, especially when I was in the prayer—and I observed that I came out of it much improved and strengthened. But after a little distraction I began to fear and wonder whether the devil, making me think the experience was good, wanted me to suspend the intellect so that he could draw me away from mental prayer and so that I might not think upon the Passion or benefit from the use of the intellect, which seemed to me a great loss because I didn't understand this prayer.

3. Moreover, since His Majesty desired now to enlighten me so that I might no longer offend Him and might know my great debt to Him, this fear increased in such a way that it made me diligently seek out spiritual persons to consult. I had already heard about some because they had come to this town and were members of the Society of Jesus³ of which—without knowing any of the members—I was very fond, only from hearing about the mode of life and prayer

they followed. But I didn't feel worthy to speak to them or strong enough to obey them, and this made me more fearful; it would have been a difficult thing for me to converse with them and yet be what I was.

4. I went about like this for some time until, after a great struggle within me and many tears, I resolved both to talk to a spiritual person (to ask him what prayer it was I was experiencing and to enlighten me if I were going astray) and to do all I could not to offend God. For, as I just said,⁴ the lack of fortitude I saw in myself made me so timid. What a terrible mistake, God help me, that in wanting to be good I withdrew from good! The devil must meddle a great deal in this matter when virtue is beginning; I couldn't make the fear go away. He knows that the complete remedy for a soul lies in consulting the friends of God; thus I didn't have the determination to do this. I was waiting to amend first, as when I abandoned prayer,⁵ and perhaps I would never have done so, because I had fallen into little bad habits to such an extent that I was unable to understand they were bad. I needed the help of others and that they give me a hand to lift me up. Blessed be the Lord, for, finally, His was the first.

5. Since I saw that my fear was increasing—because the prayer was increasing—it seemed to me there was in the prayer either some great good or some terrible evil. I understood well that I was already experiencing something supernatural because sometimes I was unable to resist; to have it whenever I wanted was out of the question. I thought to myself there would be no remedy if I didn't strive to have a clean conscience and withdraw from every occasion, even if it concerned venial sins. For if the prayer were from God's Spirit, there would obviously be something to gain from striving for purity of conscience; if it were from the devil, my striving to please the Lord and not offend Him could do me little harm—on the contrary, the devil would be the loser. Resolved to strive for this purity of conscience and beseeching the Lord to help me, I saw, after trying it for some days, that my soul didn't have the strength to reach such perfection alone on account of some attachments that, though in themselves were not bad, were enough to spoil everything.

6. They told me about a learned priest⁶ in this city whose goodness and edifying life the Lord had begun to make known to the people. I tried to get to speak to him through the help of a saintly gentleman⁷ who lives in this city. This gentleman is married, but he lives so exemplary and virtuous a life and is so prayerful and charitable that his goodness and perfection shine throughout the whole town. There is every reason for his renown because great good has come to many souls by means of him. He has so many talents

that even though his state in life isn't a help to him, he cannot refrain from using them: he is most intelligent and very gentle with everyone; his conversation, not at all boring, so mild and charming as well as upright and holy, is most pleasing to those with whom he deals; he directs everything toward the great good of the souls with whom he is conversing; and it doesn't seem that he has any other concern than to do for everyone what he sees is possible and to be pleasing to all.

7. Well, this blessed and holy man, with his diligence, it seems to me, was the principal means by which my soul was saved. His humility amazes me. I believe he has practiced prayer for a little less than forty years—I don't know if it's two or three years less. He lives a complete life of perfection insofar as it seems his state allows. His wife is such a great servant of God and so charitable that he is not held back by her. In sum, God chose her to be the wife of someone who He knew would be a great servant of His. Some of his relatives were married to some of mine; he also had a good deal of association with another great servant of God⁸ who was married to a cousin of mine.

8. In this way I arranged that the priest I said was such a servant of God would come to speak to me. This gentleman was a great friend of that priest whom I thought I could take as my confessor and master. When he brought him to speak to me, I was most embarrassed to find myself in the presence of so holy a man, and I gave him an account of my soul and my prayer; but I didn't want him to hear my confession. I told him I was very busy—and that was true. He began with a holy determination to guide me as though I were a strong person—for by rights I should have been so because of the prayer he observed I was experiencing—in order that I might in no way offend God. When I saw him at once so determined about little things that, as I say,⁹ I didn't have the fortitude to give up immediately and so perfectly, I was afflicted. Since I saw he was taking my soul's attachments as something I would have to die to all at once, I realized there was need for much more caution.

9. In sum, I understood that the means he gave me were not the ones by which I could remedy my situation, because they were suited to a more perfect soul. As for myself, even though I was advanced in receiving favors from God, I was very much at the beginning with regard to virtues and mortification. Certainly, if I were to have had no one else but him to speak to, I believe my soul would never have improved. For the affliction I felt in seeing that I did not do—nor did it seem I could do—that which he told me would have been enough to make me lose hope and give up everything.

I sometimes marvel that God was not pleased that this priest, being a person who has a particular grace for beginning to lead souls to God, understand my soul and take charge of it. I see that what happened was all for my greater good, that I might get to know and deal with people as holy as are those of the Society of Jesus.

10. It was then that I arranged that the holy gentleman come sometime to see me. Here I saw his great humility, that he wished to talk to someone as wretched as myself. He began to visit me, encourage me, and tell me that I shouldn't think I could give up everything in one day, that little by little God would do the work, that he himself had been for some years unable to make a break with some very trivial things. O humility, what great blessings you bestow where you are present and on those who approach the one who possesses you! This saint (for in my opinion I can rightly call him by this name), in his humility and for my benefit, told me about his weaknesses, which to him seemed to be such. Considering what was in conformity with his state in life, there was no fault or imperfection—whereas my having such weaknesses would have been the greatest fault with respect to my state of life.

I do not mention this without a reason, for it seems I am going on at length about trifles; but these things are so important in beginning to help a soul and show it how to fly (for it still hasn't any wings, as they say) that no one will believe what I say save the one who has passed through it. Because I hope in God that your Reverence will be able to help many souls, I mention it here; this gentleman was my complete salvation in knowing how to cure me and in having the humility and the charity to stay with me—and patience while seeing that I wasn't making amends in everything. He proceeded with discretion little by little showing me ways to conquer the devil. I began to have such a great love for him that there was no greater recreation for me than on the days I saw him, although they were few. When he was late, I became very worried because it then seemed to me that since I was so wretched he wasn't going to see me.

11. Since he was getting to know my very great imperfections, and they would even be sins—although after I spoke with him I made greater amends—and since I mentioned to him the favors granted me by God so that he could give me light, he told me that my imperfections were incompatible with the favors and that these gifts were bestowed on persons who were already very advanced and mortified, that he couldn't help but fear a great deal because in some things it seemed to him there was a bad spirit, although he didn't come to a definite conclusion. But he thought well of all that he understood about my prayer, and he said so. The difficulty was that I didn't know how to say either little or much about my prayer; for

only recently did God give me this favor of understanding what it is and knowing how to speak about it.

12. Since this gentleman told me about his fear, and with the fear I already had, I felt greatly afflicted and shed many tears. For, certainly, I desired to please God, and I could not persuade myself that the devil was the cause. But I feared that on account of my great sins God blinded me so that I couldn't know the cause. Looking through books in order to see if I could learn how to explain the prayer I was experiencing, I found in one they called *Ascent of the Mount*,¹⁰ where it touches upon the union of the soul with God, all the signs I experienced in that not thinking of anything. This was what I was most often saying: that when I experienced that prayer I wasn't able to think of anything. I marked the pertinent passages and gave him the book so that he and the other priest I mentioned, the saintly one and servant of God, might look it over and tell me what I should do, and that if they thought I should, I would give up prayer completely—for why should I place myself in these dangers. If at the end of almost twenty years in which I practiced prayer, I showed no gain but was deceived by the devil, it would be better not to practice it—although this too would have been arduous for me because I had already experienced what my soul was without prayer. As a result, I saw danger everywhere. I was like a person in the middle of a river trying to get out; wherever he goes he fears greater peril there; and he is almost drowning.

It is a very severe trial, this one; and I have suffered many of these, as I shall say afterward.¹¹ Although the matter may seem unimportant, perhaps it will be helpful for an understanding of how the spirit must be tried.

13. And certainly it is a great one, the trial that is suffered; and caution is necessary, especially with women, because our weakness is great, and a lot of harm could be done by telling us outright that the cause is the devil. But the matter should be considered carefully, and they should turn aside from any dangers there might be and should be counseled on the importance of keeping things secret; this secrecy is fitting.

In this respect I am speaking as one who is suffering a bitter trial because some persons with whom I have discussed my prayer are not keeping it secret, but in consulting this one and that other, they have truly done me great harm. They have spread things that should have remained very secret—these matters are not for everybody—and it seemed that I was the one who published them abroad. I believe the Lord permitted it without any fault on their part so that I might suffer. I'm not saying they spoke about what I discussed with them in confession. But since they were persons to whom because of my

fears I gave an account of myself that they might enlighten me, it seemed to me they should have kept quiet. Nonetheless, I never dared to conceal anything from these persons.

Well, I'm saying that one should counsel these souls with great discretion, encouraging them and biding one's time until the Lord helps them as He did me. If I had not been so treated, the greatest harm would have been done to me because I was frightened and scared. With the serious heart trouble I had, I'm amazed that much damage wasn't done to me.

14. Since I gave them both the book as well as an account of my life and sins¹² as best I could (not through confession, since one of them was a layman, but I explained clearly how wretched I was), the two servants of God considered with great charity and love what was fitting for me.

I awaited the answer with terrible fear; after I had recommended myself to the prayers of many persons and prayed a great deal myself during those days, one of them with much anguish came and told me that in the considered opinion of both of them the cause was the devil. He told me I should take the matter up with a priest from the Society of Jesus, that if I asked this priest, telling of my need, he would come, and that I should give an account of my whole life and state by a general confession and be very frank in all, that by the power of the sacrament of confession God would enlighten him, that these fathers were very experienced in spiritual matters, and that I shouldn't neglect anything he might tell me, because I was in serious danger if I didn't have someone to guide me.

15. This frightened and pained me so much that I didn't know what to do; I was all tears. And while in an oratory very much afflicted, not knowing what would become of me, I read in a book—which it seems the Lord placed in my hands—what St. Paul said, that God was very faithful, that He would never let those who love Him be deceived by the devil.¹³ This consoled me very deeply.

I began to prepare my general confession and put down in writing all the good and bad things—as clear an account of my life as I knew how to give, without leaving anything out.¹⁴

I recall that after I had written it, I saw so many evils and so little of anything good that I was terribly distressed and in the greatest anguish. Also I was pained that persons in the house would see me speak with people as holy as are those of the Society of Jesus. For I was in fear of my wretchedness; it seemed to me I was going to have greater obligation to avoid evil and my pastimes, and that things would grow worse if I didn't do this. So I arranged with the sacristan and portress not to tell anyone. This proved of little avail, for it happened that when they called me someone was standing near the

door who then went throughout the whole convent telling about who came to see me. But what obstacles and what fears the devil places in the path of the one who wants to reach God!

16. After I spoke with that servant of God—¹⁵ for he was very much so and most wise—all about my soul, as to someone who well knew this language, he explained to me what I was experiencing and greatly encouraged me. He said it was very recognizably from God's Spirit, but that it was necessary to return again to prayer, that the prayer did not have a good foundation, and that I had not begun to understand mortification (and that was true, for it doesn't seem to me I even understood the word), that I should by no means give up prayer but strive very hard since God had granted me such special favors. He wondered if the Lord didn't desire to do good for many persons through me, and said other things (for it seems he prophesied what the Lord afterward did with me) and pointed out that I would be very much at fault if I didn't respond to the favors God was granting me. In all that he said it seemed to me, according to what was impressed upon my soul, that the Holy Spirit was speaking through him in order to heal me.

17. He made me very ashamed; he guided me by means that seemed to change me completely. What a great thing it is to understand a soul! He told me that I should devote prayer each day to a phase of the Passion, that I should benefit from this prayer and dwell only on the humanity, and that I should resist those experiences of recollection and consolation as much as I could and in such a way that I would make no room for them until he told me otherwise.

18. He left me consoled and encouraged, and the Lord helped me and him to understand my situation and how I should be guided. I remained determined not to lapse from his orders in anything, and I continued to be so determined to this day. Praised be the Lord who has given me the grace to obey my confessors, even though imperfectly; they have almost always been these blessed men from the Society of Jesus—although, as I say, I have followed them imperfectly.

My soul began to improve noticeably, as I shall now describe.

Chapter 24

Continues on the same topic. Tells how her soul made progress after she began to obey, how little it helped her to resist God's favors, and how His Majesty began giving her more perfect ones.

1. My soul was left so docile from this confession that it seemed to me there was nothing for which I wouldn't prepare

myself. As a consequence I began to make many changes, although the confessor didn't press me; rather it seemed that he thought all the changes of little importance. And this urged me more because he guided my soul by stressing the love of God and allowed freedom and used no pressure if I didn't set about doing things out of love.

So for almost two months I was trying to resist with all my might the gifts and favors of God. In exterior matters the change was apparent because the Lord already began to grant me the courage to practice some renunciation that in the judgment of persons who knew me and even of some sisters in my own house¹ appeared too extreme. When compared with my previous way of life, this renunciation was extreme, and those who thought so were right. But as for my obligation by reason of the habit I wore and my profession, it fell short.

2. In resisting these consolations and favors of God, I gained by learning something from His Majesty. For in the past I had thought that to receive favors in prayer much seclusion was necessary, and I hardly dared to stir. Afterward I saw how little such effort mattered. The more I strove to distract myself, the more the Lord enveloped me in that sweetness and glory, which seemed to surround me so completely that there was no place to escape—and that was true. I was so careful that it pained me. The Lord was more careful in granting me favors and in revealing Himself to me; much more than usual in those two months that I might better understand it was no longer in my power to resist them.

I started again to love the most sacred humanity. Prayer began to take shape as an edifice that now had a foundation; I grew fond of more penance, for I had been negligent on account of the severity of my illnesses. That holy man who heard my confession told me that some things could do me no harm, that perhaps God gave me so much sickness because, since I didn't do penance, His Majesty desired to give me some. He ordered me to perform some mortifications which were not very pleasing to me. I did everything because it seemed to me the Lord commanded it, and God gave him the ability to command me in such a way that I obeyed him. My soul began so to feel any offense I committed against God, however small, that if I was holding on to some superfluous thing, I could not recollect myself until I gave the thing up. I prayed a great deal that the Lord might keep me in His hands, that since He permitted me to consult with His servants He would not allow me to turn back, for it seemed to me that to turn back would have been a great crime and that they would have lost their reputations on my account.

3. At that time Father Francis² came to this place. He had been the Duke of Gandia, and some years before had given up all and