

Letter by Sor Filotea de la Cruz¹

Translated by William Little©
Santa Fe College (2008)

My Lady,

I have seen the letter of yours in which you impugn the gracious gifts of Christ as the Reverend Father Antonio de Vieira expounded on them in his Maundy Thursday sermon. Fr. Vieira's exposition was so exquisite that the finest scholars opined that such a singularly talented mind—like a new Eagle of the Apocalypse²—had risen above itself by following the groundwork laid out previously by the most illustrious César Meneses,³ who is counted among the foremost intellects of Portugal. But in my opinion, whoever may read your apologia cannot deny that you cut your quill more finely than both of them, and they ought to boast about being challenged by a woman who is the pride of her sex.

I, at least, have admired the wittiness of your conceits, the cleverness of your proofs, and the lively clarity with which the theme is persuasively argued, for clarity is the inseparable companion of wisdom and knowledge. For this reason, the first word spoken by the divine Word was light, because, without clarity wise knowledge has no voice. Even Christ's, when he was wont to utter the highest mysteries veiled in parables, was not considered admirable by the secular world, but only when he spoke clearly did he merit acclaim for knowing everything. This is one of the favors you owe to God, because one cannot acquire clarity through hard work and cleverness; rather, it is a gift infused in the soul itself.

In order for you and your handwriting to be seen in your essay in a better light, I have had it printed. I have done so also so that I may acknowledge the treasures God placed in your soul, and so that you may be more grateful for this favor—for being better understood. For gratitude and understanding have always been birthed during the same parturition. And if, as you say in your letter, those who have received the most from God are the most obligated to repay Him,

¹ Sor Filotea de la Cruz is a pseudonym for Fr. Manuel Fernández de Santa Cruz, the Bishop of Puebla, Mexico. The bishop's pseudonym Sor Filotea de la Cruz means Sister Godlover of the Cross, or something like that. For a picture of the Bishop, see the webpage for Bishop Fernández on the HUM 2461 website.

² The Eagle of the Apocalypse refers to St. John of Patmos, the putative writer of the last book of the New Testament, the Apocalypse (i.e., Revelations). From the 2nd century C.E. until the 20th century, Christian exegetes generally conflated John the Presbyter with both John of Patmos (the Greek island on which a person named John is said to have received the divinely inspired visions set forth in the Book of the Apocalypse) with John the evangelist and John the author of the so-called Johannine epistles (John I, II, III).

³ César Meneses. Most likely, the Bishop is referring to the aristocratic Portuguese Churchman and Political activist, Sebastião César de Meneses (? – 1672). He earned a doctorate in canon law from the Jesuit University of Coimbra, Portugal in 1628, when he published a book in Latin on Church hierarchs. Throughout his life he was an official of the Portuguese Inquisition (Santo Ofício). He participated in the Portuguese independence revolution against Spain beginning in 1640, and in 1642 he was named Bishop of Oporto, although he never actually took up the position. In 1649, he publish a book on political theory (*Suma Política*) that a modern critic (Aubrey Bell) called "notable for its logical precision and clarity and concision of form." After suffering a decade of political vicissitudes, he became Grand Inquisitor in 1663. This same year, he published a work on ingratitude, *Sugillatio Ingratitudinis*, which is not doubt the book the Bishop of Puebla had in mind when writing this letter to Sor Juana. The last ten years of his life he was condemned to internal exile several times. He is buried in the Discalced Carmelite church in Oporto.

then I fear that you are counted among His debtors, since few creatures owe His Majesty more thanks for their immense natural talents than you. And you should express your thanks to Him so that, assuming you have used them well until now (for I assume such from one who lives in your order), you can use them better from now on.

My judgment is not such a harsh censor that I find anything wrong with your poetry—for which you are so applauded—following the example of Santa Teresa, Saint Gregory Nazianzus,⁴ and other saints who canonized such a talent with their verses—but I wish you would imitate them both in terms of the prosody and the choice of subject matter.

I do not approve of the coarse manners of those who reproach studious, educated women, for so many others applied themselves to theological study, and not without praise from St. Jerome.⁵ It is true that St. Paul says that women should not teach, but he does not order women not to study in order to learn, because he only meant to prevent our sex's risk of swelled-headedness, prone as we are to vanity. Divine Wisdom removed one letter from Sarai, and he added one to the name of Abram, not because a male must have more letters than a woman, as many think, but because the "i" added to Sara was taken to mean fear and domination.⁶ 'Sara' is interpreted as "my lady"; but it was inappropriate for a subordinate woman in Abraham's household to be called "lady".

Learned letters that engender swelled-headedness are not ones that God wants in women. But the Apostle does not disapprove of them when they do not disengage women from the state of obedience. It is well known to everyone that study and knowledge have kept you in a subjugated state and that they have enabled you to perfect the charms of an obedient nun. So, if other nuns sacrifice their own wills for the sake of obedience, you apprehend your mind, which is the most arduous and pleasing sacrifice one can offer on the altar of our Religion.

By means of these remarks, I do not expect you to change your temperament by renouncing books, but rather to improve it by sometimes reading the book of Jesus Christ. None of the Gospel writers called Christ's genealogy a book except St. Matthew⁷, because, at his conversion, this Lord of ours did not attempt to change his disposition but rather to improve it, so that, while before, as a tax collector, he would pour over books dealing with contracts and interest rates, afterwards, as an apostle, he could improve his character by exchanging the books

⁴ Saint Gregory Nazianzus the Younger (c. 330-389). He is known as "the Theologian", for his work on the Trinity and his "Five Theological Orations", and he is ranked as one of the Cappadocian Fathers of the Church. He wrote sermons, letters, and poems including *De Vita Sua* (On His Life).

⁵ Look for the many references to St. Jerome in Sor Juana's *Answer to Sor Filotea*, especially fn. 21 and fn 35.

⁶ Sarai, Sara, and Abram are references to the name changes God authorizes for Abraham and Sarah in Gen. 17: 5 and Gen. 17: 15: "God said to Abraham: 'As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name.'" The explanation by Sor Filotea (i.e., the bishop) for the supposed subtraction of a letter from Sarah's name is based on medieval European misogyny in society and theology. It is also based on sheer ignorance of Hebrew. In Hebrew, Sarah's names ('Sarai' and 'Sara') both have three letters: Sin, Resh, Yod, and Sin, Resh, He, respectively. Curiously, in Gen. 17: 15, in the Bishop's Latin Vulgate bible, Sarah's former name and new name both have three letters ('Sarai' and 'Saram'). The Bishop is thinking of the Latin nominative case, 'Sara.' W. Gunther Plaut's modern commentary on the *Torah* tells us that (New York: 1981) 'Sarai' "is probably an older linguistic form for Sarah, i.e., 'princess'" (117). Plaut adds that the change simply denotes a change in status.

⁷ The Gospel of Matthew begins with a genealogy of Jesus: Matt. 1: 1-17.

of his ruination for the book of Jesus Christ. You have wasted a lot of time studying philosophy and poetry; now it is time for you to develop more perfect tasks and to read better books.

What nation was ever more erudite than Egypt? The world's first letters began there, and their hieroglyphs caused wonderment. With great praise for Joseph's knowledge, Holy Scripture calls him a consummate expert in the wisdom and erudition of the Egyptians.⁸ And despite all this the Holy Spirit declares openly that the Egyptians were a barbarous nation. That is because, at its best, all its wisdom could understand was the movements of the stars and the heavens, but it could not check its disordered passions. Its entire science was occupied in perfecting man's political life, but it could not shine light on achieving eternal life. And knowledge that does not illuminate in the pursuit of salvation, that is what God, who knows all things, accounts as gross stupidity.

So thought Justus Lipsius,⁹ that stunning genius of erudition, being near death and his final reckoning, when our judgment is keenest. While his friends were consoling him for all the erudite books he had written, he pointed to a crucifix and said: "Knowledge that does not come from Christ Crucified is nonsense and nothing more than vanity."

I do not condemn reading these authors, but I do remind you of what Gerson¹⁰ advised: Lend yourself to these studies; do not sell yourself short; do not let yourself be robbed of these studies. Humanistic writings are captivating, and they tend to appropriate holy writings; yet they should be condemned when they steal ownership of human intelligence from Divine Wisdom, and, as writings that were intended to serve us, when instead they become our masters. They are commendable when the motive of our curiosity, which is a vice, becomes studiousness, which is a virtue.

Angels whipped St. Jerome because, groveling and seduced by reading Cicero,¹¹ he preferred the delights of the latter's eloquence to the soundness of Holy Scripture; still,

⁸ The biblical story of Joseph, son of Rachel and Jacob, is told in Gen. 30 – Gen. 50. In Gen. 41:39, the Egyptian Pharaoh says: "Since God has shown you all this, there is no one so discerning and wise [Vulgate: *sapientiore et consimiliem*] as you."

⁹ Justus Lipsius is the influential Belgian humanist Joost Lips (1547-1606) who was known as Justo Lipsio in Spain (Belgium and Holland belonged to the Golden Age Spanish territory known as the Low Countries (Países Bajos). He studied with the Jesuits in Cologne (Köln, Germany), and he taught Latin at the universities of Leiden, Louvain (Leuven), and Jena. He was the author of a number of philosophical works in Latin in which he adapted the philosophy of Stoicism (following the Roman philosopher Seneca) to Christianity. Notice Bishop Fernández's sly reference to a Golden Age philosopher and humanist as a model he supposes will convince (humanist) Sor Juana. Also, notice the Bishop's reference to a Jesuit in the context of the Jesuits' powerful influence in the Mexican religious and political power structures that were aligned against her.

¹⁰ I believe the Bishop is referring to Jean Charlier de Gerson (1363-1429), a French scholar, poet, and rector of the University of Paris. He was the theological leader of the 16th Catholic ecumenical council, the Council of Constance (1414-1418), at which the Schism in Western Christianity (i.e., three popes) was resolved. To the Bishop's mind, Gerson is a fine model for his scholarly nun because Gerson's writings tried to make Christian doctrine plain and simple. Perhaps the Bishop, who has just used the term "consolation" above, thought about Gerson because he was known as *Doctor Consolatorius*.

¹¹ Cicero is Marcus Tullius Cicero (106 BCE-43 BCE). He was a Roman politician, essayist, linguist, translator, and philosopher, and he is famous for having been one of Rome's greatest orators. He introduced Greek philosophy to Latin-speaking Romans.

commendably, this Holy Doctor took advantage of the information and the secular erudition that he acquired from such authors.

You have spent quite some time immersed in such a lust for knowledge, but now, like the great Boethius,¹² turn to profitable knowledge, joining the subtleties of natural worldly knowledge to the usefulness of moral philosophy.

It is a shame that such a great mind should plunge in such a manner into base worldly matters, that it should not wish to fathom what is happening in heaven. And once you bow to the ground, do not abase yourself any farther, considering what happens in hell. And if now and then you should be pleased to try some sweet and loving information, apply your mind to Mount Calvary, where you will see the Redeemer's gifts and the ingratitude of the one who was redeemed;¹³ there you will find a huge field for examining the overwhelming gifts of an infinite love and for formulating works of praise, not without shedding tears due to supreme ingratitude. Or alternatively, at other times your tears might usefully guide that well-stocked galleon of your intelligence onto the high seas of divine perfections. I do not doubt that what happened to Apelles¹⁴ will happen to you; namely, while he was doing a portrait of Campaspe, he was covering the canvas with as many brush strokes as love's arrows were producing wounds in his heart. Thus, while the portrait was nearing perfection, simultaneously the painter's heart was being mortally wounded by love for the original.

I am quite sure and certain that if you, given the lively train of your thought processes, were to formulate and portray an idea of divine perfections—such as are permitted to appear through the dark mirror of our faith—your soul would be illuminated in bright light and, at the same time, your will would be so inflamed and sweetly wounded by the love of God that our Lord, who has rained down such abundantly positive gifts on your natural person, would not be

¹² Boethius (Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius, 480-525) was known as "the last of the Romans". He was a Roman statesman and philosopher, and Christian tradition says he was a martyr. As a Roman consul and he became very powerful (a kind of primer minister) under the Ostrogoth king Theodoric the Great. His opponents accused him of conspiring in favor of the Byzantine Empire and for championing Catholicism against the (heretical) Arians. As a result of these accusations, he was jailed, tortured, and decapitated. Some current scholars think that Boethius was not a Christian, or, if he was, he renounced his faith before being executed. Other scholars side with the traditional view. The key evidence against Boethius as a Christian is his final work, written in prison, *Consolations of Philosophy*, in which there is not a single mention of Christianity. In this work—which echoes the Bishop's argument in his letter to Sor Juana—the allegorical Queen of Sciences (i.e., philosophy) tries to console the imprisoned statesman and philosopher. In this treatise in dialogue form, the Queen of Sciences argues in a stoical vein that worldly pursuits are unreal and inferior to the desirable pursuits of the mind. Medieval European scholars (of which, in a sense, the Bishop of Puebla was one) automatically assumed that, at difficult moments in one's life, Christian doctrine was the obvious source of consolation. Hence, for medieval students, Boethius was, ipso facto, a Christian. Medieval scholars, like the Bishop, understood automatically that a scholarly dialogue on the consolation of philosophy would stick to matters related to "natural truth" (see his phrase above, "worldly knowledge") rather than refer to the "supernatural truth" of Christian moral philosophy. Also, notice the Bishop's implied threat to Sor Juana of imprisonment (martyrdom?).

¹³ The biblical scene on Mount Calvary to which the Bishop is referring is found in Luke 23: 32-39. The ungrateful criminal is mentioned in Luke 23:39.

¹⁴ Apelles (4th century BCE) was the greatest painter in ancient Greece. He painted portraits of Alexander the Great and others. Among the stories Pliny tells about Apelles is the one to which the Bishop is referring here. The painter fell in love with Campaspe, one of Alexander the Great's concubines, when he was painting a portrait of her. Since Alexander liked the painter's work so much, rather than get angry with him, he gave the woman to the painter.

obliged to bestow on you only negative gifts in the spiritual realm. For, inasmuch as you, with your discernment, may call them graces, I consider them punishments, because a gift is only that which God works in the human heart by warning us with his mercy so that we thank him in return while readying ourselves with a debt-fulfilling gift and so that divine generosity not be dammed up but rather make the gifts to us greater.

This is the wish of her who, having kissed your hand many years ago, lives enamored of your soul. Meanwhile this love has not been cooled by either time or distance; for spiritual love does not suffer bouts of changeableness, nor does a love that is pure recognize changeableness if change is not a movement toward growth. May His Majesty hear my prayers and make you most holy, and may He keep you for me in all prosperity.

Written in the Convent of the Holy Trinity, in the Puebla de los Ángeles [Puebla], 25 November 1690. Kissing your hand, I remain your affectionate servant, Filotea de la Cruz¹⁵

¹⁵ The original Spanish for "kissing your hand" is the standard abbreviation "B. L. M. de V. md."