While also remembered as an exceptional preacher, Juan de Ávila dedicated his life to the perfection of his spiritual exercises, among them a methodical form of mental prayer. For this original contribution to the development of early modern Spanish spirituality, he stands in a unique position alongside Francisco de Osuna and Ignacio de Loyola. His work helped lay the foundation for the spirituality of Teresa de Jesús and Juan de la Cruz.

There is, however, a story that remains to be told about the development and trajectory of his ascetic spirituality. One of the first chapters of this story deals with the growth of his rule of spiritual life for the clergy; another chapter of the same story deals with the growth of his rule of spiritual life for the laity. Both had their origin in the Andalusian town of Écija, where his ministry began in 1527 and was abruptly brought to a halt by the intervention of the Inquisition in 1531. The rule that was intended for the laity found definitive expression in the *Breve regla de vida Cristiana*, or *Short Rule of Christian Life* of 1556.¹ I shall discuss the rule for the laity in the following chapter; the present chapter, however, will focus on his rule for the clergy.

His rule for the clergy is outlined in four letters. Two of them were composed in the early part of 1538; one was addressed to an unknown member of the clergy located in Córdoba, and the other to García Arias.² The dates of the other two letters are uncertain, but they can be hypothesized with a reasonable degree of certainty. Letter number eight, *A un sacerdote*, can be dated to after 1542.³ The basic contours of his

¹ *Breve regla de vida cristiana*, OCNEC, pp. 2:839–843.
rule for the clergy can also be found in a letter he wrote to Fray Luis de Granada in or around 1544.4

Scholars have for long recognized the significance of a corpus of minor or shorter Avilista writings known collectively as avisos (“notices”) and/or reglas (“rules”). In the Nueva edición crítica of Ávila’s works most of these shorter writings are collected in volume two, under the rubric of Escritos menores (Shorter writings).5 Esquerda Bifet captures the existing scholarly consensus when he describes the avisos as “lists” or “advice for a sound and robust spirituality.”6 His understanding of Ávila’s reglas is characteristic of the scholarship, including the judgment of the editors of Ávila’s works. Esquerda Bifet describes the reglas merely as “practical lists” typified by their brevity and having no discernible difference from the avisos.7

While I will discuss these shorter compositions in the next chapter, here I will demonstrate that Ávila’s use of the term regla (“rule”) also had a very specific referent. He used the term in the first three of the four letters mentioned earlier to describe a very concrete, comprehensive, and detailed program of spiritual exercises that remained exceedingly consistent from 1538 to around 1544. Far from being merely a list of short admonitions, these letters demonstrate that Ávila had developed a methodical approach to the ascetic life, which he articulated and communicated to his followers by means of letters. Moreover, the chronology of these letters coincides with the period in Ávila’s life during which he was assiduously at work in the formation of a movement of priestly renovation. The movement acquired institutional form in the schools or seminaries that he fathered, first in Granada and later in Córdoba.

The four letters containing his rule for the clergy have never before been grouped together on the basis of their common content. All four letters are now included in Ávila’s Epistolario, found in volume four of the Nueva edición crítica; in contrast to the notices and rules which, as already indicated, appear in volume two under Escritos menores. Luis Sala Balust has observed some important parallels between the two letters of 1538.8 In his biography of Juan de Ávila, he even recognized the merit of the 1538 letters for the proper understanding of Ávila’s movement

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5 OCNEC, pp. 2:837–874.
6 Esquerda Bifet, Diccionario, p. 91.
7 Esquerda Bifet, Diccionario, pp. 793–794.
8 OCNEC, pp. 1:67–68; OCNEC, p. 4:225n*. 