CHAPTER SEVEN

JUAN DE ÁVILA AND THE SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINE OF PUBLIC SERVICE

Juan de Ávila was able to muster elements of traditional Roman Catholic piety in a subtle but straightforward criticism of Castilian patrician families. His criticism found expression in many of his sermons on the Eucharist and on the Holy Spirit. In his sermons he called for frequent communion, and developed the concepts of “bien comulgar” and spiritual communion. Furthermore, he defined *limpieza* as an inner condition to be distinguished from external or ceremonial cleanness. Based on these ideas he called the nobility to abandon values of social differentiation that were grounded on notions of honor and status. The fact that he rarely differentiated between *ricos hombres*, *caballeros villanos*, or even *hidalgos*, is a telling indication of his perception of the common rights and responsibilities that defined the nobility in its function of shared governance.

However, his approach to Spanish nobility was not always confrontational or dismissive, and after all, his most important patrons came from within the ranks of the Spanish nobility. He also approached them in a more conciliatory tone by developing a positive response to their tendency to abuse power and privilege, one that can be properly regarded as a spiritual discipline of public service.¹ In his sermons and letters, he addressed the question and problematic of public service. He also endeavored to provide a theological understanding of public service and to present it in terms of his distinctively ascetic spirituality. He conceived of public service as a spiritual discipline, a spiritual exercise.

His notion of public service was informed by his own social context and we must be careful not to impose modern conceptions of the state and secular bureaucracies on his sermons and letters that deal with this subject. Nor should we approach these documents with expectations

informed by our own contemporary pluralist societies. In other words, when Ávila writes about public service and the common good it should be clear that he is thinking of public service and the common good as defined within Christendom. Ávila was addressing a feudal order and his doctrinal articulation took shape to a large extent as a response to the needs of members of the nobility.

The doctrinal principles that he articulated had applications beyond the confines of the nobility and their function in the governance of the realm. These principles also informed Ávila’s work against corruption in other spheres of daily life. Ávila also handled the topic of public service in his Advertencias necesarias para los reyes (c. 1564). Nevertheless it was in his sermons and letters that he articulated his theological views on the subject and provided a description of public service as spiritual discipline and so it is to these that we now turn. 

The Spirituality of Public Service in His Sermons

In sermon thirty-five, “Acompañando el arca del testamento nuevo,” Ávila develops his ideas about public service in relation to the celebration of Corpus Christi. He explains the responsibilities of public service by drawing an analogy with the public procession of the consecrated host. He sees a prefiguration of the procession in Old Testament stories of the Ark of the Covenant; these in turn point to Jesus Christ as the new ark. The procession of Corpus Christi is thus seen as both a reenactment of the procession, in Old Testament times, of the ark and as a figure for public service. The sermon is highly elaborated, a fact that could be easily explained by this being one of the sermons that he had transcribed for Archbishop Pedro Guerrero in 1565. Interestingly, the sermon lacks a formal exordium as well as the customary invocation of the Virgin.

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3 His spirituality of public service is consistent with Aurelio Espinosa’s interpretation of early-modern Spanish monarchical government. See id., The Empire of the Cities: Emperor Charles V, the Comunero Revolt, and the Transformation of the Spanish System (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2009).
5 In his letter to the Archbishop of April/May 1565, he makes reference to three sermons on the Corpus Christi and indicates that he had two of them transcribed for the prelate. OCNEC, pp. 4:691–693, here p. 692.