

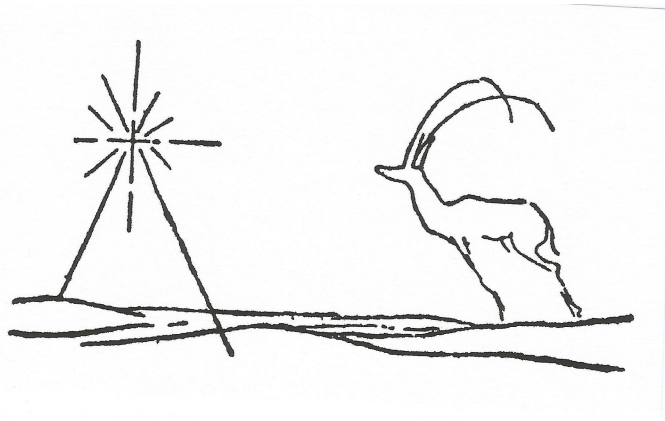
JOY AND SUFFERING

On The Feast of St Rafael Arnáiz, OCSO

The life of St Rafael Arnáiz Barón did not make sense to most of his contemporaries in the first half of the twentieth century, and it still doesn't. He dies at twenty seven years of age at a Cistercian monastery because of the lack of proper attention and care for his diabetes, when he could have lived much longer if he had remained home with his loving and rather wealthy family. Why? Was he crazy or what? In a certain way he was, as he affirmed more than once in his numerous writings, crazy for Christ. But what if he was the truly sane one? What if he had discovered a wisdom, a love, that is worth dying for?

These are a few phrases from one of his last entrances in his journal:

“Ah!, good Jesus..., if human beings would know what it is to love you on the Cross! If human beings would suspect what it is to renounce everything for You! How much joy living without self-will.



I can only say that in the love of the Cross of Christ I have found true happiness, and I am happy, completely happy, as no one can suspect, when I embrace Christ's bloody cross and I see that Jesus loves me, and that Mary loves me too, despite my miseries, my negligence, my sins. But I am of no importance... God alone.”

Our society wants to avoid suffering at all costs: constant entertainment to disguise it, drugs, euthanasia. . . We don't want to feel it or even see it in ourselves or in others, unless they are far enough from us; but suffering stubbornly remains so much part of our world and our lives.

Rafael struggled with suffering: physical, emotional, spiritual. He wanted perfect happiness, perfect beauty, perfect love, and time and again he was disappointed until he made of the cross of Christ his constant dwelling, as he says: "It is on the Cross where I have learned the little I know. . . In truth I don't know of a better place, I would not guess how to find it . . . then remain there."

Rafael was not a masochist and his constant cry "God alone" does not mean that he did not care for humankind. Quite the contrary, taking God as his single purpose, his heart stretched more and more to love all as they are, not as he wanted them to be, beginning with his own community of brothers. He understood the daily offering of himself in his prayer and sacrifices as an oblation to God for all humanity, especially for his own country, Spain, which was suffering the horrors of a civil war.

His life is the reflection of one who dared to take up his cross and savor the fruits of the Paschal Mystery. He came to live and die at the monastery because Jesus spoke to him in silence, while his voice seemed to go unheard in a world drowned in noise and in so many other pursuits. How could he refuse to follow the one who called him: "Love me. Suffer with me. I am Jesus." So he labored and persevered because he had discovered the joy that nothing or no one would be able to take away (see Jn 16:20). Was he crazy? Definitely. Would you dare?

