Early in 1548, Francis Borgia, duke of Gandía, made his profession in the Society of Jesus, but he did so in secret since he was not yet able to renounce his dukedom. Still, Borgia indulged his penchant for long hours of prayer and rigorous penance to the extent that he damaged his health. Ignatius himself had also engaged in such excesses earlier in his life and knew well the toll they took on his body. In the following letter to Borgia, Ignatius recommends that he reduce the time spent on these exercises. Instead, Borgia would be better served by devoting some of his time to study and other activities, in all of which he should continue to seek God. Ignatius urges Borgia to recuperate his health by eating as well as he can and recommends that he seek the gift of tears and interior experiences of divine consolation, without which our thoughts and actions are “tainted, cold, and troubled.”

My Lord in our Lord:

May the sovereign grace and eternal love of Christ our Lord be always our continual protection and help.

As I learned of your good order and mode of proceeding in spiritual matters and in corporal matters related to your spiritual progress, they indeed gave me fresh reason for great joy in our Lord. Thanking his eternal Majesty for this, I can ascribe it to his divine goodness alone, from which derives all that is good. However, knowing also in our Lord that we require different spiritual or bodily exercises at different times, since practices good for us at one time are not continuously so at another, I will state in his Divine Majesty what occurs to me regarding this matter, since Your Lordship bids me give my opinion.

My first thought, touching on the hours allotted to interior and exterior exercises, would be to cut them in half. For when and to the degree that there arise in us thoughts—either from ourselves or from our enemy—which move us to think or dwell upon matters which are extraneous, vain, or unlawful, and which we wish to prevent the will from taking delight in or consenting to—to that extent we ought normally to increase our interior and exterior exercises, taking into account individual persons and the different sorts of thoughts or temptations, and adapting the exercises to the persons in order to overcome them. On the other hand, the more such thoughts weaken and die out, the more there will arise in us good thoughts and holy inspirations, to which we should give unreserved admission and throw wide the doors of our soul. Consequently, from what I can judge in our Lord of Your Lordship’s case, such weapons are no longer needed for overcoming the enemies; thus, I would deem it preferable to convert half of your time into study (for in the future there will always be need or use for acquired as well as infused knowledge), to administration of your estates, and to spiritual conversations—always taking care to maintain your soul in peace, quiet, and readiness for whenever our Lord wishes to work in it. For it is without doubt a higher virtue of the soul and a greater grace to be able to enjoy one’s Lord
in a variety of duties and places rather than in one only, and we should make great efforts in his divine
goodness to obtain this.

As for the second point, regarding fasts and abstinences, my thought would be that for our Lord’s sake
you ought to preserve and strengthen your stomach and other physical faculties, not weaken them. For
in cases where a soul, first, is disposed and resolved to prefer losing its temporal life altogether rather
than offend the Divine Majesty by a single deliberate sin, however slight, and, second, is not being
plagued by any particular temptations of the enemy, the world, or the flesh—and I am convinced that
by God’s grace such is the situation of Your Lordship (in the first case affirmatively and in the second
negatively)—I very much wish Your Lordship to impress upon your soul that, inasmuch as both soul
and body are your Creator and Lord’s, you must give him a good accounting of the whole and hence
not let the bodily nature become weakened; for if it is weak, the inward nature will no longer be able to
function properly. Consequently, while I did strongly commend the fasts, rigorous abstinence, and
retrenchment from ordinary food, and for a time was quite glad about them, I can no longer do so now
that I see that these fasts and abstinences keep the stomach from functioning naturally and from
digesting ordinary meats or other foods which supply proper sustenance to the body. Instead, I would
seek every possible means to strengthen the body, eating any permissible foods and [doing so] as
frequently as you find them beneficial (barring scandal to the neighbor). For we ought to cherish and
love the body insofar as it obeys and serves the soul, and insofar as with the body’s help and obedience
the soul becomes more fitted for the service and praise of our Creator and Lord.

As for the third point, that is, inflicting hurt upon the body for our Lord’s sake, I would completely
stop any practices that could draw even a drop of blood. And if his Divine Majesty has bestowed grace
upon you for this and the rest that I have mentioned (as I am convinced in his divine goodness that he
has), I think that for the future (without giving reasons or arguments for it) it would be much better to
give all this up and instead of seeking to draw any blood, to seek the Lord of all in a more immediate
way; that is to say, his most holy gifts—for example, an infusion or drops of tears, whether (1) at our
own or other people’s sins, (2) at the mysteries of Christ our Lord in this life or the next, or (3) at the
consideration and love of the divine Persons. These tears have greater value and worth in proportion as
the thoughts and considerations prompting them are higher.

However, while in themselves the third sort are more perfect than the second, and the second than the
first, for any individual person the best is where God our Lord most communicates himself through a
manifestation of his holy graces and spiritual gifts. For he sees and knows what is best for the person
and, knowing all things, points out to him the way. To discover this way it is useful for us, with the
help of his grace, to seek out and try a number of ways so as to tread the one made clearest to us, as the
happiest and most blessed in this life and wholly directed and ordered to the other everlasting life—
whereby we are encompassed and made one with these most holy gifts. I refer to those that are not in
our own power to summon up when we wish, but are sheer gifts of him who gives and can effect all
that is good. Such are—with his Divine Majesty as their goal and scope—a deepening of faith, of hope,
of charity; spiritual joy and repose, tears, intense consolation, elevation of mind, divine impressions
and illuminations—along with all the other spiritual tastes and perceptions which are ordered to these
gifts, with humility and reverence towards our holy mother the Church and her established rulers and teachers. Any of these most holy gifts should be preferred to all bodily acts; the latter have value only so far as they contribute to obtaining these gifts, or a part of them. I do not mean that we should seek these gifts merely for the pleasure or delight they bring, but so that our thoughts, words, and actions— which we know from personal experience to be tainted, cold, and troubled when these gifts are absent—might be warm, clear, and right for God’s greater service. Thus we desire to have these gifts (or a part of them) and spiritual graces of this sort to the extent that they can help us for God’s greater glory. Hence, when the body is jeopardized through excessive hardships, the soundest thing is to pursue these gifts through acts of the understanding and other moderate practices, so that not the soul alone will be healthy but, with a sound mind in a sound body, the whole will be more sound and more fitted for God’s greater service.

As to how you should act in more particular matters, I do not think it advisable in our Lord to speak; I am confident that the same Divine Spirit that has guided Your Lordship to this point will guide and govern you in the future, to the greater glory of his Divine Majesty.