

JOHN OF THE CROSS: THE PERSON, HIS TIMES, HIS WRITINGS, Michael Dodd, O.C.D.

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JOHN OF THE CROSS: THE PERSON, HIS TIMES, HIS WRITINGS, Michael Dodd, O.C.D.

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To begin this series of lectures on St. John of the Cross, I want us to reflect on spontaneous images or associations we have for saints. St. Francis: gentle figure surrounded by birds entranced by his preaching. St. Thérèse: childlike tenderness scattering roses. St. Teresa of Jesus, Teresa of Avila: laughing and vital, dancing before her nuns with candelsticks. And St. John of the Cross? What image do you have? A friar on Christmas Day picking up a statue of the Christ child and dancing around the room? A small friar composing songs and singing to entertain his companions on a hot and dusty journey? A careful administrator, giving advice on how to deal with unscrupulous landowners over the purchase of a convent? An artist drawing sketches to give to the sisters whose confessions he hears, or designing the cloister of a monastery or supervising the construction of an aqueduct? A manual laborer working in the garden, picking chickpeas and threshing them? A religious superior surrounded by political intrigue who concerns himself first with making sure the sick

are fed, even preparing and serving them the food himself? The poet, the lover of nature, the beloved brother? What is your image?

PAST IMAGES OF THE SAINT

My guess is that none of these is the first that comes to mind, although they are all easily shown to be John of the Cross. Instead we think of the mystic, eyes gazing abstractedly into the distance, hands clutching a cross, a whip or other instrument of penance. This is the man, "dry-eyed and bleeding," called by some the butcher saint for his harsh demands and rigors. This is the saint of the dark night of the soul, the saint of the naked ascent of the Mount of Carmel. This is the saint of the nada nothing, nothing, nothing. This is the saint whose motto, reproduced on holy cards and paintings, is "To suffer and be despised for you, Lord." If the province of Avila is the land of santos y cantos, saints and stones, in John of the Cross it seems to have produced the saint of stone. Or so it can appear.

Yet when he died, crowds of the poor flocked to view his body, to kiss hands and feet. In spite of the efforts of friars to prevent it, visitors tore pieces from his habit to remember him by. The cities of Ubeda, where he died, and Segovia, to which his body was transferred secretly two years after his death, fought over possession of the remains, petitioning all the way to the Holy See for resolution. The common people venerated him so much that it actually delayed his beatification, because the reverence shown went beyond that permitted by the Church until after serious and official inquiry has pronounced on the virtues of one with a reputation for holiness. For a while the place where he was buried had to be concealed to prevent people from leaving flowers or candles there. When visiting Ubeda some years ago, I was told that the city, long before John's beatification, had gone so far as to proclaim him co-patron along with the archangel Michael. Do people respond thus to a saint of stone?

Some may be inclined to say that it does not matter what image you have of John of the Cross, since it is primarily his writings that interest us today. Yet people will also say that they find John of the Cross difficult to read or to believe or to accept. It is a commonplace to say that John of the Cross's writings should not be given to beginners in the spiritual journey or that no one should read them without the guidance of a knowledgeable director. Yet he did not write his works for specialists in

human development or those with doctorates in spiritual theology. He wrote for nuns and friars, novices and laywomen, for any who love God and desire God with passion. These people received his writings with joy and understanding. For them the writings were a precious gift, not an incomprehensible mystery. They were light, not obscurity. On their lips we could place the words of Jessica Powers about John's books, written two years before she entered Carmel as Miriam of the Holy Spirit:

Out of what door that came ajar in heaven

drifted this starry manna down to me,

to the dilated mouth both hunger given

and all satiety?

Who bore at midnight to my very dwelling

the gift of this imperishable food?

my famished spirit with its fragrance filling,

its savor certitude.

The mind and heart ask, and the soul replies

what store is heaped on these bare shelves of mine?

The crumbs of the immortal delicacies

fall with precise design.

Mercy grows tall with the least heart enlightened,

and I, so long a fosterling of night,

here feast upon immeasurably sweetened

wafers of light.1

Why this difference? I believe that it was at least in part because they knew the hands from which they received the writings that John's first disciples found them to be "immeasurably sweetened/wafers of light." It is at least partly because other readers do not know him that his teaching seems dry and cold. In order for us to experience them as light, we need to know the hands that wrote the words: hands that cared for the sick, hands that sketched and drew, hands that were calloused with labor, hands that clapped in rhythm to a dance. It will be my purpose, then, to speak about the person of John of the Cross, to tell the story of the man as a necessary prelude to reading the writings. The nature of the presentation will be primarily biographical, drawing attention to how some of the more important events shaped John's personal vision and his writings. For some this will be familiar territory, but I hope you will get some new insights. I found when trying to prepare that I had too much I wanted to say, but I have cut it down in hope of staying brief. Inevitably this means some things will remain unmentioned, other points only alluded to. I hope that you may be encouraged, though, to seek out more information on John yourself, to get to know the person.2

EARLY LIFE

He was born Juan de Yepes, third son of Gonzalo de Yepes and Catalina Alvarez, in Fontiveros, a small town near Avila, in 1542. In Gonzalo's and Catalina's story we find our first major lesson about John. Gonzalo was an orphan who lived with a wealthy uncle involved in the silk trade. In the course of working for his uncle, Gonzalo met Catalina Alvarez, a poor weaver. They fell in love, but to Gonzalo's dismay, his family greeted his engagement with anger, threatening to disown him if he were to marry below his estate. Their motives probably were more complex than mere class snobbery. The Yepes family had Jewish roots, a fact carefully hidden to avoid legal restrictions imposed on those who lacked *limpieza de sangre*, purity of blood. Catalina's background was obscure but the Yepes family feared that questions raised about her origins might lead to an investigation of their own. Better to wash their hands of the boy completely than to risk honor and money before the Inquisition.

Gonzalo was not swayed by threats of dishonor or of poverty. He married Catalina

despite the objections of his family and the graphic predictions of disaster voiced by Catalina's own protector and landlady. It was probably 1529. The threats of the family were carried out; the warnings of the landlady were realized. Without resources of his own, Gonzalo learned to weave and they scraped out a living as a negligible part of the textile trade of Castile. In 1530, Catalina gave birth to her firstborn, Francisco. He was followed by Luis, date of birth unknown, and finally, in 1542, by Juan. In spite of hard work, the household was wretchedly poor and food scarce. Soon after John's birth, Gonzalo fell prey to one of the pestilences that swept through Spain during the sixteenth century and died, leaving a young widow with three starving children.

This background holds an important lesson about the family that produced John of the Cross: in the face of true love, everything else is cast aside. John grew up listening to his mother speak about her husband, hearing how Gonzalo had been raised in comfort with every expectation of material and social ease. Francisco, who for a short time was placed with one of his father's wealthy relatives, could describe the way Gonzalo could have lived had he not given it all up for Catalina. The young Juan would learn about priorities and would see firsthand the consequences of choosing love over all else. When he grows up and falls in love with God, John presses on with the spirit of Gonzalo, leaving all behind naturally, because it is love alone, love in Person, that matters.

Catalina attempted to obtain assistance from Gonzalo's family, appealing first to a brother-in-law who was an archdeacon in Torrijos near Toledo. This worthy person made excuses and closed the door in the widow's face. Another brother, a doctor in nearby Galvez, agreed to take Francisco in and adopt him. However, the doctor's wife began to abuse Francisco and Catalina finally took him back home.

Then Luis, the middle son, died, apparently of malnutrition. This convinced Catalina that she would never survive in the limited economy of Fontiveros, and she moved first to Arevalo and then in 1551 settled in Medina del Campo, a thriving market town in sixteenth century Spain. There she continued her weaving, assisted by Francisco.

Although the stay in Arevalo was brief, it was important for Francisco. A lively and sociable young man entering his twenties, Francisco did not let hard work at the looms during the day keep him from wandering the town streets at night, playing the

guitar and singing with his companions until the small hours, often falling asleep in church not because he had gone there to pray, but because friendly sacristans would give him space to sleep off his revels. He was apparently guilty of at least minor vandalism and thefts. Following one episode in which some almonds he had stolen proved to be bitter, and apparently frightened that his trespassing had incurred an excommunication, Francisco sought spiritual guidance from a sympathetic priest. Under that man's wise direction, he gave up his nightly rambles with his companions and instead used the night hours to gaze silently into the sky, losing himself in prayer. Encouraged by Catalina, he married Ana Izquierda and settled down as a respectable member of a hardworking household.

In Arevalo and in Medina del Campo, these truly poor people began to be noted for their charity towards others in need. Francisco went out at night looking for the hungry and the homeless, bringing them back to share the little food and shelter he had or finding a place for them in one of the hospitals of the city. Besides working to earn a living for his own family, he begged alms to pay the expenses of those in greater need. He was sensitive to those who were ashamed to beg themselves and included them in his charity. Rather than ridiculing the impoverished nobility who were too proud to earn a living by labor, Francisco discreetly sought to help. Finally, this family that saw seven of eight children die in infancy and childhood made a special mission of rescuing abandoned babies, taking them into their own care or arranging for their placement and begging alms to pay expenses. The parish records of the city note many times where these infants received the sacraments with Francisco and his wife or mother for sponsors.

Note the contrast between the charity that marked this impoverished household and that of Gonzalo's well-to-do family. Juan entered adolescence witnessing a profound religious conversion in his brother whom we know he loved dearly. This conversion does not repress Francisco's high spirits but redirects them towards contemplation and an immediate practical care for those in need. This is a charity that extends itself to those who lack good name as well as those who lack good things. Juan's family bears witness to a Christian love that is not reserved for friends and family nor for the "deserving poor," but like the love and mercy of God pours out on all. It is a charity that touches and does not fear to get its hands dirty. It is a charity that gives on the basis of need, not on the basis of what it possesses. It is not a charity that parades itself for honor or recognition nor for the sake of increasing

merit or adding to a celestial credit account. It is simply and purely love, springing from deep prayer and communion with God. It is against such a background that John will judge works of charity or ministry later, rooting out self-serving elements invisible to others, highlighting the essential connection between personal relationship with God in prayer and service rendered to others, exhorting to put love where one does not find love so as to draw love out, and so imitate the way God loves us.

In Medina, Juan was placed in the School de la doctrina (of doctrine), a sort of boarding school for poor boys that provided basic reading and writing, catechism and preparation for a trade. A farsighted policy at the time encouraged establishing such schools. "For it is certain," according to the Castilian court, or parliament, in 1548, "that by finding help for these lost children, robberies and serious and enormous crimes will be prevented. If these children are left to go free without a guide, such crimes will increase."³ Note the implication of the social stratum from which John comes: poor, urban, illiterate and largely untrained, source of violence and danger to society at large. The remarkable virtues of his own family are not universal. We must recall this milieu when we read John's words about disordered appetites. He lived among the results of those disorders selfishness, greed, oppression, violence and he saw the difference in the quality of life in his poor family and those around him. He knew from this that the problem was not in things, possessed or unpossessed, but somehow in the human heart and mind.

Juan was rather incompetent at manual skills. Francisco testified that John's mother "tried to place her youngest son where he would learn a trade, and after trying carpentry, tailoring, carving, and painting, Juan did not settle into any of them; although he was fond of helping his mother with her work."⁴ One happy result of this shuffling about from apprenticeship to apprenticeship is that Juan picked up a number of skills that would prove helpful later on, even if his dexterity was unremarkable. Francisco's remarks may indicate greater success for John as weaver, but I suspect it reflects a certain domesticity, a helpfulness with maternal tasks and nurturing that would characterize the John of later years who knew how to prepare meals to tempt ailing friars and who wrote easily of God, using images of a loving mother nursing, weaning and teaching children to walk.

Juan proved to be better at verbal skills, learning to read and write quickly. As part of the regimen of the school, he went out to beg alms for the children and served

as acolyte at a nearby Augustinian monastery of nuns. There he was spotted by Don Alonso Alvarez de Toledo, administrator of one of the fourteen hospitals in Medina del Campo. This Hospital of the Concepcion, popularly called de las bubas, was primarily for victims of plague and venereal diseases. Don Alonso gave Juan a job as an orderly in the hospital, with hands-on care of patients as well as responsibilities to beg alms for their support. Thus we find Juan in a situation that calls for sensitivity, tenderness and discretion. It says some thing about his background that he should have willingly gone to work in a place that might be compared to an AIDS hospice today. He distinguished himself by his gentleness with the sick and acquired an ease with them that reappears later in his care of ailing fri ars. He was seeing again firsthand the results of disordered living. Perhaps these images of disease and suffering in the flesh color his later vivid descriptions of the harm sinful or misguided desire does to the soul.

Impressed by the young attendant, Don Alonso helped him continue his studies at the newly founded Jesuit college in Medina, equivalent to a rather advanced high school spe cializing in the humanities. John spent four years there, taught by young Jesuits who were noted educators of their day. Attending classes in grammar, rhetoric, and philosophy went hand in hand with his duties at the hospital, meaning that the eager young student had to read well into the night. Thirsty for truth, charmed by the beauty of language, Juan consi dered the sacrifice of a few hours of sleep small to gain so much. Already he was learning some of the skills that would bear fruit in the poetry and prose of his maturity.

FIRST YEARS IN CARMEL

Don Alonso was pleased with the progress and promise of his protege and wanted to spon sor Juan for priesthood so that he could add the care of souls at the hospital to his other concerns. But Juan de Yepes had other ideas. In 1563, probably on February 24, he went secretly to the recently founded Carmelite monastery of Santa Ana, and asked to receive the habit of Our Lady of Mt. Carmel. Apparently it was his great love of Mary that drew him to her Order. Attracted by the contemplative traditions of Carmel and undoubtedly influenced by other natural motives, it is ultimately love that moved Juan de Yepes to lea ve all behind as his father Gonzalo had done. In the Order, he was known as Fray Juan de San Matia, John of St.Matthias.

The fervent young novice (and in this, John is hardly unique, although his family background probably intensified his response) flung himself wholeheartedly into the religious observance, internalizing the values of the Order readily. Noted even as a novice for his love of solitude, his devotion to prayer and to penance, John was admired but perhaps not particularly popular. Some considered his zeal extreme. Others smiled and expected him to grow out of it with experience. Juan no doubt would have quoted the motto of the Order: "With zeal have I been zealous for the Lord God of Hosts." His zeal would mature and some aspects of it would change, but the son of Gonzalo de Yepes was incapable of half measures.

In 1564, after making his profession, John went to the Carmelite College of San Andrés in Salamanca. There he studied the spiritual and theological tradition of his own order, and also attended the larger university itself. Appointed prefect of students by his superiors, he gave lectures to his companions and even took part in debates with senior faculty. This experience at one of the leading theological faculties of the world, including among its members men who had played a significant role at the recently concluded Council of Trent, prepared the disciplined mind that would write the precise analyses of the Ascent of Mt. Carmel and Dark Night of the Soul.

However, John of St. Matthias was not totally happy. Although he had obtained permission to follow the Rule of his community in what he thought was its primitive rigor, his behavior set him apart from his fellow students. His penitential way of life earned some admiration, but his love of solitude did not hide his sense of isolation. He began to consider transferring to the Carthusians, believing that their radical commitment to solitude and contemplation was what he wanted. Still he hesitated. In spite of his great love for solitude, John knew the need for companionship on the journey. He would write in later years, "The virtuous soul that is alone and without a master, is like a lone burning coal; it will grow colder rather than hotter. Those who fall alone remain alone in their fall, and they value their souls little since they entrust it to themselves alone. If you do not fear falling alone, do you presume that you will rise up alone? Consider how much more can be accomplished by two together than by one alone" (Sayings of Light and Love, 7-9). He was experiencing that he could not do it alone, but had not yet found the person to help him out.

In 1567 the newly ordained John of St. Matthias made a visit to his home

monastery of Santa Ana to celebrate his first Mass for his community. While there, a brother student suggested he might want to visit a nun who was in Medina arranging for the foundation of a new monastery of Carmelite nuns. This was Teresa of Jesus, formerly Teresa de Ahuma da y Cepeda, who in 1562 had established a reformed community of nuns in Avila and had now, with the blessing of the general of the Order, begun to establish more houses of strictly enclosed nuns who would follow the more primitive European Rule and devote themselves to contemplation and intercession for the Church. These sisters wore a simpler habit than the other nuns and like most reform groups of the day had adopted the sandals that were the footwear of the poor. This easily noted difference in dress led them to be called *las descalzas*, the *discalced* or barefoot Carmelites.

Teresa had met with the Carmelite prior of Medina, Anthony de Heredia, discussing with him a new project for which the general had given permission: the establishment of two houses for *Discalced* friars. These, while not cloistered like the nuns, would follow the ancient Rule of Carmel and be given to a more contemplative lifestyle than the other Carmelites. They would have some ministry, however, for one reason she wanted to found monasteries for men was to give the Church apostles whose active labors would be deeply rooted in personal prayer. To Teresa's consternation, Fr. Anthony offered himself as her first friar. Teresa suspected his age (he was then 57) would be against him, so she suggested he wait and practice living the stricter regimen for a while to see if he wished to pursue it.

Then came her visit with John of St. Matthias, a visit she describes in the *Book of her Foundations*: "And when I spoke with this young friar, he pleased me very much. I learned from him how he also wanted to go to the Carthusians. Telling him what I was attempting to do, I begged him to wait until the Lord would give us a monastery and pointed out the great good that would be accomplished if in his desire to improve he were to remain in his own order and that much greater service would be rendered to the Lord. He promised me he would remain as long as he wouldn't have to wait long" (F, 3, 17). With Teresa's assurances, John returned to Salamanca for one last year of studies. Teresa reported to her nuns, "We can begin. We have a friar and a half." Whether the half friar was the short John or the older and less certain Anthony we do not know.

This episode underlines again the passion of John of the Cross to give himself

totally, without reserve. The refreshingly human and youthful extraction of a promise not to have to wait too long reminds us of John's remarks about young lovers of God being like new wine, full of fizz and bubbles. Old friends are like old wine, less bubbles but more faithful and no longer vulnerable to going sour (cf. C, 25, 10-11). Perhaps he is reflecting on his own experience that had shown him enthusiasms are not always the best guide for life decisions.

THE TERESIAN REFORM BEGINS AMONG THE FRIARS

In the summer of 1568, John went with Teresa to make a foundation of nuns at Valladolid. She taught him all she could about the way of life of the nuns and her vision for the friars. She desired that he "have a clear understanding of everything, whether it concerned mortification or the style of both our community life and the recreation we have together. He was so good that I, at least, could have learned much more from him than he from me. Yet this was not what I did, but I taught him about the lifestyle of the sisters" (F, 13, 5). That Teresa was the teacher at this moment was important. While she had confidence in John, his reputation was for penitence; her vision of a way of life included community and recreation and she wanted to make sure he knew this.

In a letter to a friend about the experience, Teresa noted wryly that "the Lord seems to be leading him by the hand, for, although we have had a few disagreements here over business matters, and I have been the cause of them, and have sometimes been vexed with him, we have never seen the least imperfection in him. He has courage. "5 A young, inexperienced friar with his ordination oils barely dry on his hands would have needed courage to disagree with Teresa of Jesus. She admired and loved John of the Cross, but when she chose someone to oversee the expansion of her movement among the friars, it was someone she found more manageable than John of the Cross. Yet the courage she praised was to stand him in good stead during his nine months of prison in Toledo in defense of her reform.

In the fall, John set out for the new monastery in Duruelo, little more than a tumbledown shack, miles from nowhere. On November 28, the first Sunday of Advent in 1568, he along with Anthony de Heredia and a brother put on the new habit of the discalced Carmelites, renounced the mitigated Rule and began a new life. They took new names, and he became Juan de la Cruz, John of the Cross.

These first friars gave themselves to a life of great simplicity and recollection. They were quite poor, but Teresa was greatly edified at the spirit of the new community and its obvious happiness. She continued to be concerned about possible excesses in corporal penance because she wanted to attract young men of learning who would be apostolically fruitful and did not want to frighten them off by unnecessary or unhealthy ascetical practices. She delighted to find that the friars were going to nearby villages to preach, to hear confessions and to teach.

John brought his family to live and work at the monastery. His mother and sister-in-law helped with cooking and cleaning and his beloved Francisco labored alongside the friars in setting the monastery in order. No doubt John was happy to have their companionship and support as he began this new endeavor. When reading his words about attachment and a too natural love for family, we must remember his love for his own and his willingness to bring them around him when he could. His doctrine about detachment is for the sake of purifying love and affection, not destroying them. His experience in his family and its practice of charity had helped purify his own love so that he was free to express and trust it.

The community soon outgrew its home, and in 1570 they moved to a new monastery in Mancera de Abajo. John, in his role as first novice master of the Reform, trained new members in accord with the vision outlined to him by Teresa. In October of the same year, he went to establish the novitiate at a new monastery in Pastrana that would become a central novitiate, where all new friars would get their initiation into the life of the reformed Carmel.

In spring of 1571 he went to Alcala de Henares to found a house of studies for friars preparing for ordination. John, because of his intellectual skills, his experience as prefect of students in Salamanca and his success in forming new Carmelites, was commissioned with establishing a house and directing the students who would also attend the nearby university. He continued forming the first generation of discalced friars, reminding them in the midst of their studies of their priorities: *religioso y estudiante, religioso delante* ("you are a religious and a student, but a religious first"). This is not a dismissal of scholarship, but rather a statement of John's personal principle that all goes well when things are done in proper order.

During the year John was in Alcala, a telling incident took place. He was sent back

to Pastrana to moderate the excessive strictness and physical penances of the new novice master, a certain Angel of St. Gabriel. It is noteworthy that it was John of the Cross who was chosen to gently correct the erroneous overemphasis on self-inflicted pain and humiliations. Only a short while before, he had himself been considered excessively rigorous. John's personal experience and his interaction with St. Teresa had brought him to appreciate the limitations and possible misuse of corporal mortification. He was already aware that it is an evangelical interior mortification, a purifying of mind and will, that matters. When he wrote about the faults of beginners some years after this, he noted that "corporal penance without obedience is no more than a penance of beasts" (N, 1, 6, 2). Such experiences with misguided excess in the name of spirituality impressed on the young friar the necessity of a purification of spirit as well as of sense.

WITH TERESA IN AVILA

Meanwhile, in October of 1571, St. Teresa had been sent back to Avila, to the Monastery of the Incarnation that she had left to begin the reform. The superiors imposed her on the community as prioress to try to do something about the virtual collapse of the community, economically as well as spiritually. Teresa knew she could accomplish more with the support of a good confessor for the nuns, and she asked for John of the Cross. He arrived in late spring of 1572.

Both in the confessional and visiting in the parlor he assisted Teresa, winning the nuns over with his gentleness, guiding them firmly along the way of self-denial towards greater perfection. It was during the two years that they were both in Avila that he had his most intimate contact with Teresa, to their mutual benefit. She later wrote to Mother Anne of Jesus that after John left Castile, she had found no one comparable to him for inspiring souls with fervor.⁶

John proved himself a profitable guide for those as advanced as Teresa as well as others who were taking their first steps on the journey. There were over one hundred nuns, most of whom went to confession every week or every two weeks. John spent hours giving personal attention to the sisters, guiding them steadily toward a better following of Jesus Christ in their Carmelite vocation. Although they had been frightened of him at first (given that same reputation for strictness and rigor), again they came to love him dearly and mourned his departure. When John wrote about

spiritual directors later in the Living Flame of Love (see F, 3, 29-62), he did so out of this intense experience of guiding people of varied temperament, experience and capacity. The great respect he had for the uniqueness of each person and the way the Holy Spirit moves was evident in his dealings with the nuns of the Incarnation.

Teresa's term ended in 1573 and she moved on, but John remained until 1577, living in a small hermitage near the convent with another of the discalced friars, rather than remaining at the nearby Carmelite friary. For now there was tension between the ancient observance and the fledgling reform.

IN THE PRISON OF TOLEDO

The details of the problem and all the personalities involved need not detain us here. Suffice it to say that it was a matter of confused jurisdictions, with each party appealing to different interpretations of the law.⁷ Suffice it to say also that these conflicts involved the Holy See, the general of the Order, papal nuncios friendly and hostile, Dominican visitors appointed to reform Carmelites, a king and royal council who happily interfered with Rome's policies, and individuals who displayed lack of prudence (to put it mildly). Poor John of the Cross, quietly hearing confessions of nuns, would seem an unlikely target for the growing hostility. Yet as the first of the discalced, he was a symbol of the movement that many sincerely felt was destroying the Order. As confessor to the nuns of the Incarnation, he had replaced Carmelite friars of the ancient observance who saw him as a rival for that position.

On the night of December 2, 1577, a group of hostile Carmelite friars, laymen and armed guards broke into the hermitage where John lived with his companion. The two men were seized, and taken separately to places of hiding. John was carried off to Toledo blindfolded and under cover of darkness. He had no idea where he was, and the secret was remarkably well kept. He remained a prisoner until August of 1578 in spite of efforts to locate and rescue him. Teresa even appealed to the king, but to no avail. In the monastery, he was kept in a tiny room that had served as a latrine. It was scarcely large enough to lie down in, with no furnishings, no warmth against the cruel Toledo winter, only one window, a mere slit in the wall high up. He was not allowed to celebrate Mass nor to receive any visitors. Three days a week he was taken out to the dining room where he was threatened, cajoled and finally beaten in

attempts to force him to renounce the reform. For the rest of his life he bore the physical scars of this treatment. Incredible as it sounds to us today, the friars were merely executing the sentence prescribed in the law for an incorrigible rebel. John was certain he was right, but so were they. It was a stalemate.

As a way of passing the time, he began to compose poems in his head, usually to fit popular romantic tunes he heard in the distance. A sympathetic jailer gave him writing materials, and he wrote down some verses that he probably took with him when he escaped. He remained in the darkness of his cell, John consoled himself with images of woodlands and meadows. He composed part of the poem of the "Spiritual Canticle" and the "Romances on the Gospel." The former would develop into a love song of such power that it continues to be set to music in Spain. The latter poems, not of the same quality as John's great poetry, nonetheless reveal a powerful experience of the reality of the Triune God and of the goodness of creation brought to fulfillment in the Incarnation. It was amazing. He had been stripped of everything: health, friends, food, warmth, reputation. His enemies took everything from John but his God. In the darkness of the prison the son of Gonzalo de Yepes encountered his beloved, and that was enough to make him sing.

By August it was apparent that he was not going to be released and that no one was coming to rescue him. He managed to tie blanket strips together to make a rope, loosened the screws on the locked door, and one dark night managed to sneak out, throw the rope over the wall and slip away unseen. Ascertaining that he was in Toledo, he made his way to the convent of the discalced Carmelite nuns. He told them who he was and, on pretext of having him hear the confession of a nun who was ill, they took him inside and concealed him in the cloister. When the friars came to see if he was there, the nun at the door merely told them: "It would be amazing if you were to find a father in here." Suspicious but unable to do anything, the friars left, and with the help of a patron, the nuns got John out of town. Before he left, he recited some of his verses to them, and the nuns wept to see such an emaciated, cruelly treated man sing songs of pure love.

FREEDOM AND NEW BEGINNINGS IN ANDALUSIA

John then went to Almodovar del Campo, where another discalced meeting was under way, this time trying more earnestly to come up with some resolution to the

problems. At the chapter the discalced illegally elected their own provincial and sent delegates to Rome to try to straighten things out with the Holy See. They appointed John of the Cross superior of the monastery of El Calvario, far to the south, to remove him as soon as possible from the reach of the friars of the ancient observance who were still seeking their escaped prisoner. The chapter was unauthorized and the jurisdictional problems continued, but John was now out of the turmoil that raged for another two years and of which he had been the outstanding victim.

What a change from his prison cell was El Calvario, with the beautiful countryside of the Segura Sierra to enjoy, the peace and calm of a small hardworking community, and John's own labors. He used to take the friars out into the mountains, talk to them of the beauty of God, and send each off to pray in some place of natural beauty, himself often choosing the side of a stream that welled up not far from the house. He had learned in the purifying trial of Toledo that God is present everywhere, even when natural beauty is lacking. In the prison, it was the beloved who was the mountainside, the rivers, the forests, the fields enameled with flowers. John's love of natural beauty was not diminished but purified, and he rejoiced now to see the traces of the Beloved everywhere he looked. He had learned that nature could be a distraction from God, but that it could also, in its own creatureliness, speak profoundly of the Creator, not hiding God from sight but pointing beyond and through itself to the hidden Beloved. His writings reveal a deep appreciation of nature coupled with an awareness of the failings of the human heart until all is ordered properly to wards God. John knew from his own experience that the person transformed by God sees and loves creation in its own full truth and beauty for the first time.

John served at this time as confessor for the discalced nuns in the nearby village of Beas de Segura. He had stopped there on his way to El Calvario, and although the nuns were touched by what he had undergone, the prioress, Anne of Jesus, was a bit offended that so young a priest should refer so casually to the great Teresa of Jesus as "my daughter." Shortly afterwards she wrote to Teresa about this and also complained that the nuns had no one capable of giving them adequate spiritual direction. Teresa promptly wrote back in no uncertain terms: "I am really surprised, daughter, at your complaining so unreasonably, when you have Padre Fray John of the Cross with you, who is a divine, heavenly man. You would not believe how solitary his absence makes me feel. I can assure you I should very much like to have Fray John of the Cross here,

for he is indeed the father of my soul."8

Anne of Jesus, properly reprimanded, took Teresa at her word, and John came frequently to the nuns, hearing confessions and giving them instructions on the way of perfection. Anne became one of his closest friends and collaborators, and he wrote the commentary on the "Spiritual Canticle" for her.

In response to questions about the significance of some of his poems, which he would re cite for the friars and nuns, John began to comment on certain passages, thus beginning the process that resulted in his major prose works. The books emerged, then, rooted first in his own experience of God expressed in the images of the poetry, then gradually commen ted on in the light of the life and experience of those he served. For all the philosophical and theological framework of the commentaries on his poem "One Dark Night," which he probably wrote remembering his escape from prison in the middle of the night, the origi nating experience is one of passion, and the questions addressed come from life, not spe culation.

In 1579 John was again given the task of founding a house for students, this time in Baeza for the discalced Carmelites in southern Spain. He was rector there until 1581 and became a very popular figure in the town as a confessor to professors and to simple country folk as well. He continued to take care of the Beas nuns (although it was further to travel) and to expand his commentaries on his poetry. During the time John was in Baeza, on June 22, 1580, Pope Gregory XIII made the discalced a separate province of the Order, thereby resolving, at least for the most part, the conflict that had been going on for five years.

On March 3, 1581, the first real provincial chapter of the discalced was held, and in spite of his desire to get out of administration, John was elected prior of the monastery at Gra nada.

He was prior there from 1582 until 1584, after which he became vicar provincial (second in command) for Andalusia, remaining in residence in Granada until 1588. Not content with administrative duties, he worked as a manual laborer getting the monastery in better shape. One of his accomplishments was building a small aqueduct, which he designed and helped construct, to bring water from the mountain to the house. Although the friars are no longer there, the aqueduct remains as a

witness to John's practicality as well as his eye for form and beauty.

It was in Granada that John completed his poems and major treatises. This is all the more amazing in that he was frequently on the road as vicar provincial, making foundations of friars and nuns throughout the territory.

Perhaps this is the answer to the problem of why John failed to complete either the *Ascent of Mount Carmel* or the *Dark Night of the Soul* commentaries. He may simply have put them at the back of his desk, planning to get to them if no one came to his door. For those with multiple duties pulling them in different directions, he might be a sympathetic ear.

FRESH CONFLICTS

Meanwhile, other things were developing that would embroil John in political difficulty again. In 1582 Teresa had died, and in 1585 Father Jerome Gracian, to whom she had wholeheartedly entrusted the success of the reform among the friars, was succeeded as provincial by an Italian, Nicholas Doria, a financial genius, penitential and legalistic to the core. Already he was convinced that the new order was in decline and he was determined to set things straight; that meant, basically, to recreate Teresa's order in his own image. Part of that involved getting rid of his rival, Jerome Gracian, who held more humane views and who was known to be Teresa's favorite. Doria set out to discredit Gracian and managed to have him deprived of all offices, eventually driving him out of the Order itself. Part of the irony of the situation was that Gracian had cast the deciding vote making Doria provincial, and John had told him at the time, "Your Reverence is making a man provincial who will strip you of the habit."

This rather scandalous political maneuvering was going on at the same time that Doria was working to have the new province made into a congregation, still under the general of the Order, but otherwise totally independent with its own vicar. Sixtus V, on June 27, 1587, approved Doria's Constitutions and the Discalced were now a congregation. In June of 1588 (a month after Gracian had been barred from holding any offices) the first general chapter met in Madrid. Doria was elected vicar general and John became first consultor, leader of a six member board that assisted the vicar in the government of the new congregation. This was despite John's open opposition

to the treatment Gracian received.

As first consultor, he was superior of the central house at Segovia, where he moved in 1588. Whenever Doria was absent, John was head of the entire congregation. It is worth remembering that when he first talked to Teresa about his desire to withdraw to the Cartusians, she promised him all the solitude and recollection he desired. Yet from the time he was at Duruelo until a few months before his death, he was in a position of leadership in the Order, constantly dealing with matters of practical administration. Perhaps one reason he spoke of his time in prison as a singular grace was that it was the only respite from heavy responsibilities!

One consolation in Segovia was that John had his brother Francisco with him. He had brought him there to help with some building, and when Francisco started to move on, John detained him, protesting that they might not see one another again. He used to introduce his brother to guests as his dearest treasure on earth. They must have made an interesting pair, the simple illiterate laborer and his brilliant younger brother, now an important leader in a growing religious community. It was to Francisco that John told the story that would come to serve as a motto for him. John wanted to move a painting of Christ carrying his cross from the monastery to a more public location so others could benefit from it. After doing so, he had a vision that Christ spoke and asked him, "John, what reward do you desire for your labors?" John replied, "Lord, to suffer and to be despised on your account." I draw your attention to the "on your account." John's request was not masochistic self-loathing or a need to be punished; it was rather in the same spirit as the apostles in Acts who rejoiced that they suffered for the sake of the name of Jesus. John asked to be allowed to show his love to its fullest extent. And as with all such prayers, when sincere, his request was answered.

EXILE AND DEATH

Doria was displeased with his consultor, for John, whose courage and forthrightness Teresa noted when they were together in Valladolid, never failed to express his opposition to Doria's treatment of Gracian and his dealings with the nuns, whom Doria was seeking to reshape according to his own rigid and legalistic ideas. The other consultors were docile to Doria, but he would brook no opposition, especially since he knew that John represented the feelings of many of the friars and

most of the nuns. At the chapter of 1591, John was appointed provincial of Mexico, with the hope that he would be no threat several thousand miles away. When his health began to fail, that appointment was revoked.

Instead he was sent to the tiny community at La Peñuela, where he gave himself up to prayer, to working in the fields and to his old apostolate of spiritual direction. Because of his reputation for austerity, some of the friars had been afraid of him, but they soon began to experience his gentleness and capacity to entertain, without ever leading them away from single-minded devotion to God. The community loved him and considered themselves blessed to be the site of his exile.

But not all was sweetness and light. With the knowledge of Doria, one of the consultors, a Diego Evangelista, began a campaign to discredit John and to have him destroyed. When Diego Evangelista was a young man, John had had occasion to correct him for taking pride in his success as a preacher. Having seen true charity expressed in the service of his family to the poor, John recognized self-importance masquerading as piety when he saw it. Lest we think John had been wrong, notice that the young man held the grudge and now set out to get his revenge, mounting a smear campaign against the first disalced friar with the express intention of driving him out of the Order. His friends wrote, warning of what was happening, but John remained undisturbed. Nothing was to come of the process, though not because of official reluctance to press it.

On September 12, John became ill with a fever. Nothing could be done to bring it down at La Peñuela and he had to go elsewhere for treatment. Given a choice of going to Baeza, where he had been superior and was still loved, or to Ubeda, he chose Ubeda where he would encounter another persecution. The prior, Fr. Crisostomo, like Diego Evangelista, had been corrected by John years earlier and he was not at all pleased to serve as host for the ailing friar. John took the abuse calmly, but others in the community complained to the provincial none other than Anthony of Jesus, the old prior of Medina who had begun the reform with John and about whom Teresa had had doubts because of his age! Anthony appeared, insisted that John receive better treatment, and stayed to console his old partner. Eventually John's charitable acceptance of everything won over the prior who had tormented him, and Crisostomo became one of his greatest admirers and died himself with a reputation for great holiness. John's choice of the harder way for himself had opened

a channel of grace for another.

John's condition worsened as the inflammation in the leg progressed and nothing could stop the spread of gangrene. Finally, on the evening of December 13, 1591, the end drew near. After listening to some verses from the Canticle of Canticles, he prepared himself for death. At midnight as the bells rang for the office of matins, John asked what they were for. When they told him, he exclaimed, "Glory be to God for I shall say them in heaven." He kissed his crucifix and murmured, *In manus tuas, Domine, commendo spiritum meum* (Into your hands, O Lord, I commend my spirit), and he breathed his last. He was 49 years old. The hands that had tended the sick, that had sketched Christ crucified, that had lifted stones from the garden, that had penned words of light and love, were still.

I must conclude with an apology for what is largely a biographical sketch, with only hints of implication. But I hope I have lifted at least a little the veil that history has slipped over the face of John of the Cross. No butcher saint, he, no saint of stone. A man of fire and love, warming and enlightening those he knew and offering that light to us as well. Next time you pick up his writings, remember first this man. See if it changes what you read, if it helps to understand. And remember these encouraging, exciting words from his "Prayer of a Soul Taken with Love":

With what procrastinations do you wait, since from this very moment you can love God in your heart?

Mine are the heavens and mine is the earth. Mine are the nations, the just are mine and mine the sinners. The angels are mine, and the Mother of God, and all things are mine; and God himself is mine and for me, because Christ is mine and all for me. What do you ask, then, and seek my soul? Yours is all of this, and all is for you. Do not engage your self in something less or pay heed to the crumbs that fall from your Father's table. Go forth and exult in your Glory! Hide yourself in it and rejoice, and you will obtain the supplications of your heart. (Sayings of Light and Love, 26-27)

NOTES

1. "The Books of Saint John of the Cross," Selected Poetry of Jessica Powers, ed.

Regina Siegfried and Robert Morneau (Kansas City, MO: Sheed & Ward, 1989), 132.

2. The material that follows is taken from a number of biographical sources. The standard Spanish biography, written by Crisogono de Jesús, has been translated into English by Kathleen Pond as *The Life of St. John of the Cross* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1958). An award-winning French biography, *St. John of the Cross*, by Fr. Bruno, O.D.C, is also available in English, edited by Benedict Zimmerman and with an introduction by Jacques Maritain, published by Sheed and Ward in 1932. Other sources of information in English include the translation of Leon Cristiani's *St. John of the Cross: Prince of Mystical Theology* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1962); Gerald Brennan, *St. John of the Cross: His Life and Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973); Robert Sencourt, *Carmelite and Poet: A Framed Portrait of St. John of the Cross* (New York, NY: Macmillan, 1940); E. Allison Peers, *Spirit of Flame: A Study of St. John of the Cross* (London: SCM Press, 1943); and most recently Richard Hardy, *Search for Nothing: The Life of John of the Cross* (New York, NY: Crossroad, 1982). Peers and Hardy are both still in print and readily available. No doubt the commemoration of the fourth centenary of John's death will result in new studies. The volume mentioned in the following footnote is one such.

3. See Federico Ruiz, et al., *God Speaks in the Night: The Life, Times and Teaching of St. John of the Cross*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1991), 54.

4. *Ibid.*, 36..

5. *The Letters of Saint Teresa of Jesus*, trans. E. Allison Peers, 2 vols. (London: Sheed & Ward, 1980), 1:52 (Letter 10, end of Sept. 1568).

6. *Letters*, 2: 624-625 (Letter 261, Dec. 1578).

7. For a discussion of the jurisdictional complexities see Victor de Jesús Maria, "Un conflicto de jurisdicción," in *Sanjuanística* (Rome: Collegium Internationale Sanctorum Teresiae a Jesu et Joannis a Cruce, 1943), 413-528.

8. *Teresa*, *Letters*, loc cit.

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1. http://www.icspublications.org/archives/others/cs6_3.html
2. <http://www.icspublications.org/archives/others/cs6.html>
3. http://www.icspublications.org/archives/others/cs6_5.html
4. <http://www.icspublications.org/copy.html>