

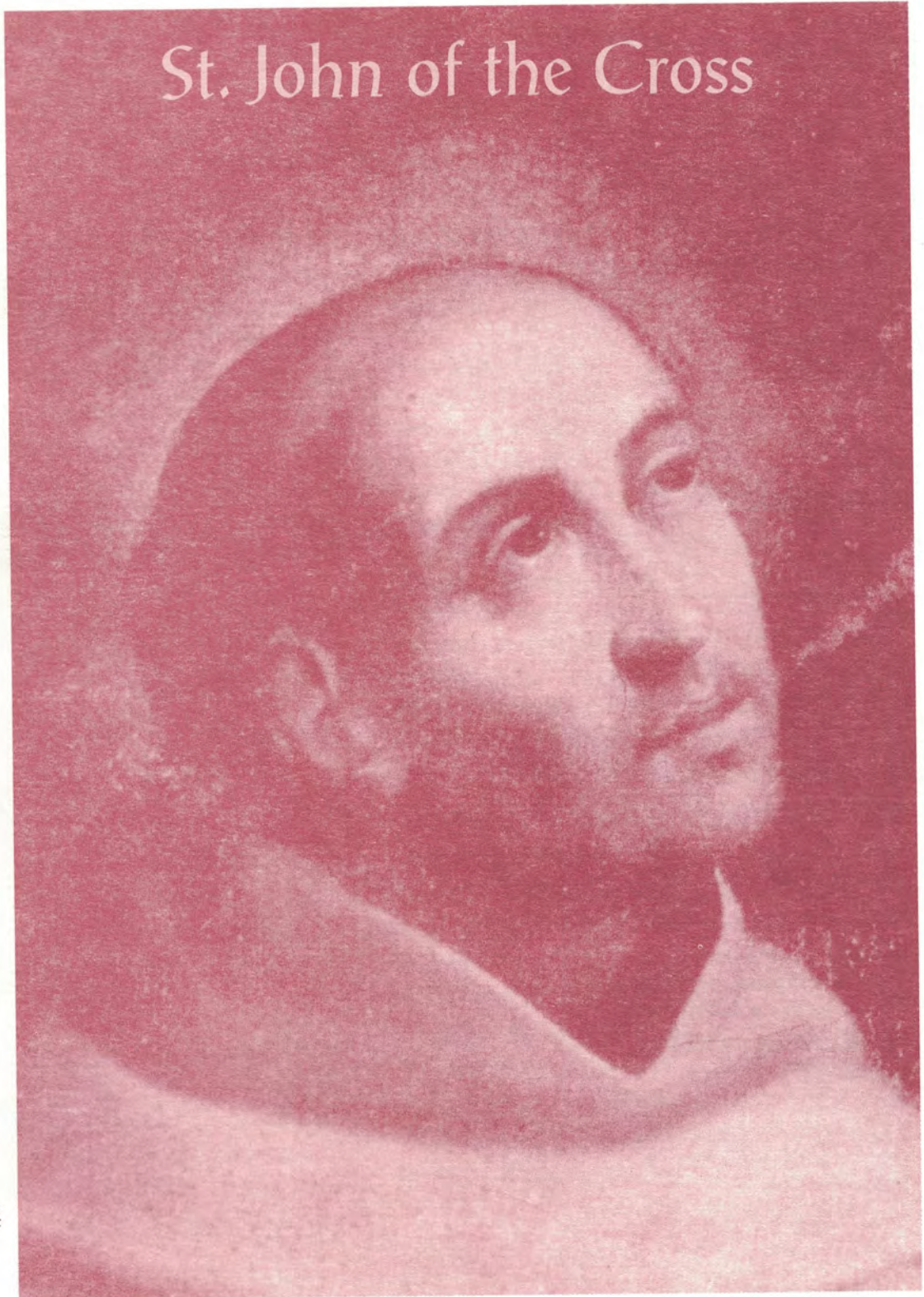


CARMEL CLARION

Discalced Carmelite Secular Order

Washington, D.C.

St. John of the Cross



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It is very appropriate that we end the year with the Clarion dedicated to the teachings of our Holy Father St. John of the Cross. It is well known that this great mystic stood in awe before the mystery of the Incarnation. This is clearly seen in his poem entitled *Romance on the Gospel* text “In principio erat Verbum,” regarding the Blessed Trinity. After giving a summary of salvation history, John goes on to the Incarnation. He creates a beautiful dialogue between the Father and the Son. The Son says to the Father:

*I will go and tell the world,
spreading the word
of your beauty and sweetness
and of your sovereignty.
I will go seek my bride
and take upon myself
her weariness and labors
in which she suffers so;
and that she may have life,
I will die for her,
and lifting her out of that deep,
I will restore her to you.*

Note well the sentiments John attributes to our Savior: “I will go and tell...I will go seek...take upon myself...I will die...I will restore her to you.” There is an eagerness, a determination on Christ’s part to become one with us, to share our weariness and

labors all for the purpose of restoring us to the Father.

In the last stanza concerning the birth of the child John writes:

*Men sang songs
and angels melodies
celebrating the marriage
of Two such as these.
But God there in the manger
cried and moaned;
and these tears were jewels
the bride brought to the wedding.
The Mother gazed in sheer wonder
on such an exchange:
in God, man's weeping,
and in man, gladness,
to the one and the other
things usually so strange.*

What an “exchange!” There is no way we could ever imagine, in our wildest fantasy, that this “marriage” could take place. We will gaze, in wonder, for all eternity at this marvelous event in which the love of God was completely poured out in the person of His Son. As John reminds us in A2,22,5, He has nothing more to tell us or give us. He has given us everything in Jesus Christ.

May you all have a very blessed and happy Christmas and New Year. ■

Fr. Regis, O.C.D.

John of the Cross and the Laity

Leonard Doohan



When Juan De Yepes entered the Carmelite Order in 1563 at the age of 21, many of the qualities that would mark his later life were already formed, often in interaction with exceptional laity, primarily his family but others as well.¹

John had been born in 1542, the third child of Catalina Alvarez (a poor orphaned silk weaver) and Gonzalo de Yepes (member of a wealthy Toledan silk merchant family that disowned him at the time of his marriage). Shortly after John's birth, Gonzalo contracted a serious and painful illness, and died when John was only two. Rejected by Gonzalo's relatives because she was not of the appropriate social standing, Catalina struggled through acute poverty, social ostracism, unemployment and homelessness, migrating from town to town in search of work, food, and education for her sons. Around the time of John's sixth birthday, his brother Luis died, probably of malnutrition. Francisco, John's oldest brother, was a typical teenager, offering Catalina many worries until a youthful conversion transformed him into a young man of prayer and concern for the needy. Francisco married Ana Izquierdo. The young couple began to share not only Catalina's home, but also its life of virtue, love, care for the needy, struggles, endurance, and hard work.

Within this extended family, John likewise experienced poverty, hunger, homelessness, rejection, the constant struggle to find work or deal with expensive and debilitating illnesses. But he had also shared a foundational experience of good family life that would not be crushed by oppression, would not allow rejection to turn to bitterness, injustice to anger, or seeming hopelessness to despair. Many of the values and virtues evidenced in John's later life are rooted in the initial formation he received in his own family, which was, in its own way, a model of beatitudinal living: blessed are the poor, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger, the merciful, the peacemakers, the single-hearted, and those who suffer persecution.

In Medina del Campo, John was first sent to kind of boarding school for orphans and children of the poor; later he was trained in carpentry, tailoring, and painting (though his talents lay in other directions). As a teenager, John began working as an orderly in the local Plague Hospital,

under the guidance of a generous lay administrator, Don Alonso Alvarez. John showed great ability in working with the sick, obtaining alms for their support and developing the patience and compassionate love for others that would always remain with him. In his free time he studied at the local Jesuit school nearby.

In short, John came to the Carmelites already familiar with sacrifice, both that which is actively pursued and that which is passively accepted. He was a person of profound love, nurtured in his family but extended to everyone, especially the poor. He could live without bitterness toward those who seemed responsible for injustice, for his mother had trained him to see all life as part of God's plan. He was a person with extraordinary single-mindedness in pursuing his goal. While he had not yet expressed them fully, John was already living the basic principles of his "system" of spiritual growth.

Significant Laity in the Life of John of the Cross

Even after John's entry into the Carmelite Order, lay people continued to play a major role in his life, as friends, spiritual directees, and partners in ministry. John first met Teresa of Avila in late 1567 while she was in Medina del Campo, staying in the home of a lay benefactor, the wealthy merchant Blas de Medina. She and John agreed to collaborate in spreading Teresa's reform to the Carmelite friars. John set out to open the first house of the reform in a small dilapidated farmhouse in Duruelo, given to Teresa by the layman Don Rafael Mejia Velazquez. Teresa had instructed John not to go directly to Duruelo but to pass through Avila and visit Francisco de Salcedo, a layman who had already played a special role in Teresa's own spiritu-

al maturation. While we do not know what Francisco said to John, Teresa obviously trusted this layman's advice at a crucial time in the founding of the friars' reform.²

The laywoman Dona Ana del Mercado y Penalosa likewise played a crucial role in John's life, and in the spread of the Carmelite reform to Andalusia.³ A wealthy widow, she assisted John and Anne of Jesus in establishing a monastery of the discalced Carmelite nuns in Granada. She became one of John's closest friends, and the directee for whom he would write (and to whom he would dedicate) the Living Flame of Love, his most sublime work. She later returned to her original palace in Segovia, becoming the principal benefactress of the discalced Carmelite monastery in that city. When John was eventually transferred to Segovia himself, she left her palace to live in some small buildings directly across the road from the entrance to the monastery, so that she could be closer to her director. In fact, as a reward for her generosity, she obtained permission to be buried there in the Carmelite chapel next to her husband, and that no matter where John of the Cross would die he too would be buried in the same place.

In addition to the Living Flame, two of John's thirty-three surviving letters were written to Dona Ana (*Letters* 28 & 31). These writings indicate John's profound appreciation for this "noble and devout lady."⁴

"Jesus be in your soul.

...I mentioned in the other letter how I desire to remain in this desert of La Penuela...

...Pray for this, my daughter. But even though I am so happy here, I would not fail to come should you desire.

Take care of your soul and do not

confess scruples or ...imaginings in which the soul does not desire to be detained. Look after your health, and do not fail to pray when you can" (Letter 28).

And again, shortly before his death, John writes:

"Jesus be in your soul, my daughter in Christ.

...I am very happy to know that [your brother] is now a priest of the Lord.... Even though I am forgetful, I will not be able to forget him, since he is so close to his sister whom I always remember.

Greetings in the Lord to my daughter Dona Ines. And may both of you pray God to prepare me that he may bring me to himself" (Letter 31).

These letters show John's concern for her friendship and health, while the Living Flame, the description of the later stages in the spiritual life, shows how deeply he knew and appreciated her spiritual and mystical maturity.

In fact, as John moved to various cities he always attracted the friendship and spiritual commitment of laity. In Baeza there were Teresa de Ibros (a farm laborer's wife and a mystic), Maria de Paz, Maria Vilches, Juana de Arjona, Juana de la Paz, Bernardina de Robles, Juan de Vera (a sculptor and painter).⁵ In Segovia there were Dona Ana del Mercado y Penalosa, her niece Ines (mentioned in Letter 31 above) and her maid Leonor de Vitoria.⁶

In Granada lived Juana de Pedraza, to whom John wrote two of his surviving letters.⁷ In the first, he expresses genuine friendship and his delight in receiving letters from her, and also speaks of love of God and obedience to the divine will in ways that presume Juana's spiritual maturity:

"Jesus be in your soul.

A few days ago I wrote to you ... in answer to your last letter, which, as was your hope, I prized....And I have felt your grief, afflictions, and loneliness. These, in silence, ever tell me so much more that the pen cannot declare it.

...O great God of love, and Lord! How many riches do you place in the soul that neither loves nor is satisfied save in you alone, for you give yourself to it and become one with it through love....But because it behooves us not to go without the cross, just as our Beloved did not go without it, even to the death of love, God ordains our sufferings that we may love what we most desire, make greater sacrifices, and be worth more" (Letter 11).

Ten months later John writes again to Juana, who is feeling abandoned both by God and by her friends, including John. He reaffirms his friendship, and challenges and supports Juana in the desolation she is experiencing.

"Jesus be in your soul and thanks to him that he has enabled me not to forget the poor, as you say, or be idle, as you say. For it greatly vexes me to think that you believe what you say; this would be very bad after so many kindnesses on your part when I least deserved them. That's all I need now is to forget you! Look, how could this be so in the case of one who is in my soul as you are?"

Since you walk in these darknesses and voids of spiritual poverty, you think that everyone and everything is failing you. But nothing is failing you, neither do you have to discuss anything..., because all of these are doubts without

basis. You are making good progress. Do not worry, but be glad!

...You were never better off than now because you were never so humble..., nor did you serve God so purely and disinterestedly as now. What is it you desire? What kind of life or method of procedure do you paint for yourself in this life? What do you think serving God involves other than avoiding evil, keeping his commandments, and being occupied with the things of God as best we can? When this is bad, what need is there of other apprehensions or other lights and satisfactions from this source or that? ...[What] need is there in order to be right other than to walk along the level road of the law of God and of the Church, and to live only in dark and true faith and certain hope and complete charity, expecting all our blessings in heaven, living here below like pilgrims, the poor, the exiled, orphans, the thirsty, without a road and without anything, hoping for everything in heaven?

Rejoice and trust in God, for he has given you signs that you can very well do so, and in fact you must do so" (Letter 19).

In Ubeda John's friends and benefactors included Dona Maria de Molina and her two daughters Catalina and Ines, Doctor Villarreal, Don Bartolome Ortega Cabrio, Cristobal de la Higuera, Juan de Cuellar, and many others.⁸

John also attracted many young people to his spiritual guidance, and while some of them may have later become priests or religious, it was as laity that the initial commitment was made; Juan de San Pablo, Luis de

San Angelo, Jose de la Madre de Dios, Sebastian de San Hilario. Clearly, in his own day, John was close to lay people, who valued his friendship and guidance.

Interpreting John of the Cross for the Contemporary Church

Some great spiritual leaders seem to have a message mainly for their own times, and do not speak as effectively to later generations. Others, like Ignatius of Loyola, Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross, are canonized (i.e., considered canonical) by the faithful, who are convinced that their lives and teachings have enduring value. This does not necessarily mean that such individuals are better in any absolute sense than the many hidden saints known only to God, but rather that their teaching and example capture universal values and respond to common human concerns.

John of the Cross notes in opening pages of *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, for example, that his "main intention is not to address everyone, but only some of the persons of our holy order of the primitive observance of Mount Carmel, both friars and nuns, since they are the ones who asked me to write" (Ascent, Prologue, 9). We should not be surprised, therefore, that he develops no explicit "lay spirituality" in the contemporary sense. John of the Cross did not write specifically for us, nor did he have our church and world in mind. This means that we cannot take a fundamentalistic approach to his experience or his writings, but must constantly reinterpret John's teachings in the light of our own knowledge and experience, so that what was spirit and life when he proclaimed it can again become spirit and life for us today. Reading John of the Cross, then, requires many interpretational skills. Here I mention a few points to keep in mind when interpreting

John for contemporary lay Christians.

First, John's special ministry to the consecrated religious of sixteenth century Spain does not mean that he undervalued the lay vocation. Quite the opposite! But the social context was different. For many, religious life represented the only outlet for a special commitment to follow Christ; others were forced by their families to join because of social and financial concerns. John's teachings are directed to all who wished to dedicate themselves to God. His doctrine is all the more valid today in light of Vatican II's emphasis on the "universal call to holiness."

Second, the role of the church in sixteenth century Spain was also very different from our present experience, much more rigidly hierarchical, a "perfect society;" official power was invested almost exclusively in the nobility and clergy, with the majority of the laity often illiterate. John, however, seemed to focus on religion as a movement of the Spirit within the whole ecclesial community. Though always respectful of church authorities and appreciative of the sacramental economy of the church as the normal channel of grace, John's ecclesiology was more expansive; he seemed unhampered by exaggerated concerns with institutional issues, even though involved in them.

Third, many spiritual movements in John's time considered temporal realities an encumbrance to spiritual growth, something the religiously devout should normally despise as of no value. By contrast, the Second Vatican Council spoke of the intrinsic goodness of creation and the legitimate autonomy of earthly realities. Despite occasional appearances to the contrary, John was ahead of his time in valuing the created order as God's gift, "through the Incarnation of his Son and

through the glory of his resurrection ... clothed ... entirely in beauty and dignity" (Canticle 5,4). What must be eliminated, for John, is not the outer world but our inner possessiveness. The harsh-sounding statements in the first book of the Ascent and elsewhere should be understood not as a rejection of the created order, but as a call for a fundamental rectification in our human values. Unlike some dualistic, world-negating spiritualities that cannot be adapted to our present needs, John teaches rather that values and desires not conducive to a God-directed life must be transformed and redirected. Our "disordered appetites" must be integrated and purified, rather than absolutized or destroyed—a message as valid for married couples as for celibate religious.

Finally, contemporary spirituality seems to be in some sense less "individualistic" than much of the piety in John's day. This is not to deny that Christians of the Spanish Golden Age were interested in social issues, or concerned about the poor and oppressed. But spiritual texts of the time tended to focus more exclusively on the relationship between the individual soul and God, without the same attention we see today on developing a collective spirituality of social justice, world transformation, or political service. Indeed, John himself ordinarily speaks of the individual soul and God. Yet the principles John presents are just as valid in a communal perspective. Peoples and nations, as well as individuals, need to undergo the purification of the Nights in their journey together to God.

As the church gains new insights about itself, human development, and the social or psychological aspects of life, it reflects and then confronts these with the gospel and if necessary adapts its spirituality or creates



new spiritualities. John's teachings offer major challenges for contemporary laity provided we interpret them in changed contexts. Sometimes the language may put us off, but the doctrine is as valid as ever. He articulates the universal call to holiness, challenges all of us to emphasize the life of the Spirit in times of exaggerated institutional concerns, sees life dynamically (everything, whether earthly or heavenly, can be directed either toward God or toward self), and calls us to synthesize all aspects of life in one great self-commitment, both integrated and wholistic.

John, a Model for Key Aspects of Lay Life

We have already seen John's very positive view of family life. This was not just a youthful phase left behind upon entering the Carmelites. He kept in contact with his family throughout his life. John's mother Catalina developed a close relationship with the nuns of the Teresian reform, as did his brother Francisco with the friars. Francisco visited John several times in Segovia, and John visited Francisco in Medina del Campo. They were not only brothers but friends, and "soul

friends" too, as they both strove to lead God-directed lives in their different vocations. Catalina's house in Medina was on the same street as the monastery of the discalced Carmelite nuns. Teresa insisted that they make sure Catalina suffered no want, and their account books show they followed Teresa's directions. In her home, the domestic church over which Catalina presided, John's initial and lasting formation took place. As he grew and gained new insights into life with God, his family teachers became disciples and coworkers, sharing a common vision and commitment. John of the Cross's appreciation of maternal love was so profound that he chose it as an ideal symbol of God's love for us (see Night 1,1,2; Canticle 27, 1).

John's early life provided the strong foundation for a spirituality of work (see Ascent 3,28,6). Later in the reform he was a tireless worker for others in both his ministry and his writing. But he also showed good leadership and organizational skills in managing the business of the reformed houses. He worked hard to generate financial support for new foundations, and Father Doria relied on those skills in the expansion of the monastery in Segovia. John contributed practical building and painting talents in remodeling the first house of the reform in Duruelo, and his artwork was used in decorating new foundations. He also helped design two of the monasteries, which were built under his direction. He planned the cloister in Segovia and the aqueduct in Granada—both still admired.

John also balanced his intense working life with leisure. He could enjoy recreation with his community, singing, dancing, giving religious interpretations to poetry (see Ascent 3,24,5). He appreciated the beauty of the countryside, and many sections of his writings offer a sound basis today for an ecological spirituality.

One of John's most delightful qualities was his capacity for friendship, which he compared to union with God (see Night 1,7,4). Not only did he interact well with his brothers in community, who loved him very much, but he made new friends easily, in Baeza, Granada, Segovia and elsewhere. He was comfortable with the wealthy and those of high social status, with church people, with the poor, and also with women, whether lay or religious.

Christians today are more conscious than ever of the Church's strengths and weaknesses. John's spiritual journey took place in the midst of a troubled church. His seemed to be a balance of faith and realism; he believed in the church in spite of its human failings and continued to live his own life with honesty and a healthy distance from what was detrimental to true ecclesial life. His deep sense of obedience did not prevent him from disagreeing with his superiors when he felt they were wrong, planning his escape from the monastery prison of Toledo, or attending "illegal" chapters of the reform.

John is well known for his call to purify our religious concepts and images, since even good but finite images can become idols; we end up worshipping ideas of our own creation (see Flame 3,73). Among the most destructive idols today is the image of laity as an isolated and passive part of the church. One of the first things laity need to renounce is this false notion of themselves. Ninety-eight percent of the church are laity! Jesus' call was to all, equally and without distinction—there were no "clergy" or "laity" in the modern sense among Jesus' first disciples. One of the great lessons John of the Cross teaches us is to be open to new movements of the Holy Spirit, willing to reject and

not be enslaved by harmful images from the past. John is rooted in the uncluttered core of the Christian spiritual life; he interprets its essential call for changing circumstances, and he identifies for all of us the universal call to holiness. This is why his teaching and example remains so important for laity today. ■

Notes

1. For further biographical information on John of the Cross, see especially 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); Richard P. Hardy, *Search for Nothing: The Life John of the Cross* (New York, NY: Crossroad, 1982). John's family background and youth are discussed in exhaustive detail in the first two chapters of the former work.
2. See *God Speaks in the Night*, pp. 95-96.
3. See *God Speaks in the Night*, pp. 222-223, 323-325.
4. All quotations from John are from *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez, 2d ed. (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1991). The letters are quoted according to their numbering in this edition. The three arabic numerals following references to the *Ascent* and *Night* indicate the book, chapter, and section, respectively, from which selections from *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* and the *Dark Night* are taken; similarly, the two numbers following references to the *Canticle* and *Flame* indicate the stanza and section from which quotations from *The Spiritual Canticle* and the *Living Flame of Love* are taken.
5. See *God Speaks in the Night*, pp. 207-211.
6. See *God Speaks in the Night*, pp. 323-325.
7. See *God Speaks in the Night*, pp. 243, 343-345.
8. See *God Speaks in the Night*, pp. 365-366.

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Spiritual Life, Fall, 1993.

St John of the Cross and the Seasons of Prayer

Iain Matthew

“...And I am feeling very well, glory be to God, and doing fine. The openness of the wilderness really does soul and body good—though my soul is in great poverty. The Lord must want it to have its own spiritual desert. Well and good, so long as that is what pleases him. His Majesty already knows what we are when left to ourselves.”

This is John of the Cross writing to his friend, Ana de Penalosa, August 1591, a month before his final sickness begins to overpower him. It is a bewildering time. John’s moral authority had once led him to positions of influence and respect in his Order. Now, abruptly, he has found himself on the sidelines, a focus of controversy, victim of a campaign to have his name disgraced. “Just being his friend was a crime.”¹

John is writing from La Penuela, an isolated monastery in the foothills of the Sierra Morena in the south of Spain, far away from the responsibilities and politics of Castile. The stillness is a mirror of his own spirit: a still point in a jostling, jealous world.

In the midst of all this, John is in desert surroundings, el desierto. He is pleased to be there. It “does soul and body good.” He relishes the solitude, openness, anchura, room to breathe. Apparently it was during this time that he reedited his most personal and intense writing, the Living Flame. The desert lets him connect with what is truest in him.

It is also a place where he knows his poverty: “my soul is in great poverty;” a desert of the spirit, where he is not simply in command, where things do not just work for him. That too can be a good place. It spells surrender to God’s plan, not the pushing of his own.

John encourages us to go there. The place of poverty within us is the threshold at which Christ stands. Our need is a way of prayer.

John of the Cross: The Voice of Fragility

“People do not know how rightly to rejoice, nor how rightly to mourn, for they do not know the distance between good and evil”² In the face of the world’s pain, John’s writing can seem rather private;



too slow-moving to keep up with human need. In fact, the vaster the pain, the more vital John's word. When the need is so far-reaching, superficial solutions will not do. John is one who has traveled the distance, from darkness to light; he has been led to the places within him which border on good and evil. Knowing that distance, his word goes to the root causes and can lead us, not to superficial adjustment, but to a gospel mourning and a genuine joy.

Given the quality of John's testimony, it is all the more illuminating, then, to see where his word originates. The events in his story are worth recalling, to highlight this one fact: that John's word issues from a history of weakness.

One witness was later to speak of the striking conjunction in John of strength, commitment on the one hand, and gentleness, mildness, on the other.³ His life had fired him to just that temper. The death of his father and brother when John was an infant; his displacement as a child as the family looked for a living; John's work as a teenager with people dying of syphilis; a crisis in direction at

the time of his ordination, through which Teresa helped to guide him: these were so many events emptying his spirit, carving out a nothingness, an expectancy, for the divine.

The honing of his spirit came to a head in circumstances where his weakness was extreme: months of imprisonment in Toledo for his part in the Teresian reform. Transferred to a tiny, dark dungeon, where hunger, squalor and isolation could set to work, John was pushed there beyond thresholds he had never had to cross before, into unfamiliar regions, where his emotional and physical weakness would have made him very vulnerable.

And it is precisely here that John began composing his most personal poetry, from which his writings derive.

That then is a first indication for us from John about prayer: the place within us where not everything is all right, where the wound that is in you aches. John says: go there.

The Wound is the Place Where God Dwells

Go to that place of need, because that is a threshold at which Christ stands; our need is an evidence of God. This is a second lesson from John on prayer.

It is said that physical hunger passes through three phases.⁴ You stop eating and you need food and that is hard to cope with. But as time passes, the body settles into a rhythm, feeding on its fat reserves. The point comes, though, when these reserves run out and the body begins to feed on its own substance. Then hunger turns into a desperate craving, all the person's instinct to preserve their life invested now in this, the body's cry.

In our life of faith, too, there are levels and phases. Perhaps one is in that second phase: what once was powerful and com-

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pling has settled down, a steady jog, feeding on reserves. But if one were taken further, to that third level of hunger, what would we find? That was the place John reached, and from which his prison poem, *The Spiritual Canticle*, begins: a word that issues from the substance of his spirit, the heart's cry, craving for life.

*Where have you hidden
Beloved, and left me groaning?
You fled like a stag
having wounded me;
I went out in search of you,
and you were gone ...*

This stanza, expertly crafted and couched in Song of Songs language, is the cry of John's spirit. He has experienced a wound within him. He calls out from there. Calls out for what?

At this point in his life, with dungeon walls and lice for company, John had many needs. He lacked light, warmth, food, clean clothing, medicine for his wounds; he might have been helped by reassurance that he had not made a mistake, that his life's endeavor would be fruitful, that his friends still believed in him. All these protective layers were being stripped off him. But when he is exposed in this way, what he calls out for is none of these. "God, give me light, clothing, safety, friendship, a welcome, a future." What he cries for is "You;" a person, Another; Christ. "Where have you hidden, Beloved." It is as if the removal of all those layers laid bare a deeper wound, the need which John is: it reveals John as a need for God.

John confirms that for us, too, there is a third level of hunger, where our reality, the "substance" of the soul, is crying out for God.



To be taken there is an immense blessing. Our need is the measure of our dignity, the reverse image of our greatness. When the person is empty and cleansed, "the thirst and hunger and the spirit's feeling of longing is more than can be borne ... The capacity of these caverns is deep, for that which can fill them is deep, infinite, and that is God. So in a sense their capacity will be infinite, and so their thirst infinite, their hunger too is deep and infinite, their sense of undoing and pain is an infinite death ... since the soul is in a sense ready to receive what will fill her."⁵

It is natural to flee from the place where that hunger throbs. Still, John encourages us to go there. It is what beckons the divine. It is the threshold at which Christ stands. We hunger for him because he has touched us; we want him because he wants us. The wound is the print of the pledge upon us, the pledge of the Spirit who holds us from the abyss. John comments on his poem: we

*“Step free of your longings and you will find what
your heart really longs for.”*

“have our feeling of longing, the sense of God’s absence” precisely there, “within our heart, where we have the pledge.”⁶

Two pointers, then, about prayer from John of the Cross: go to the fragile place: it is Christ who is waiting there.

Open Spaces and the Terror of the Night

Thirdly, much of John’s system is really about this: trying to get us there, to the place of our need; to get us to go there, and stay there. The desert can be scary. The spirit suffers from a natural agoraphobia. The night is disconcerting: it’s safer back in the house, with the glow of party lights and small talk.

In *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, John expends his energy encouraging us not to lose our nerve or settle for a cheap alternative. When the wound that is in you begins to ache, or the anesthetic in you starts wearing off, do not grasp for compensation. Stay there. Show yourself you can stand there. Do not be a slave to the fear of not being anaesthetized. Risk stepping into that open space where you need God. “Step free of your longings and you will find what your heart really longs for . . .”⁷

In the books of the Dark Night, John is talking to people who are being taken there. John’s nada is mystical, a nothingness into which he himself was led, far beyond the re-

gions of his expertise. In that aching, open, darkened place, the temptation is to read the openness as emptiness, and to panic. John says rather, stay there; let God work there; say yes to the God who is feeding you precisely there.

*The person was wearing this white garment of faith as she went out in this dark night. She wore it as she journeyed . . . in inner darkness and oppression, when her mind was giving her no relief; no light from above, since heaven seemed closed and God seemed hidden; no light from below, since her teachers were failing to meet her need. On this journey, she persevered, bearing it with constancy, passing through these difficulties without giving up or giving up on her Beloved.*⁸

In probing our neediness, the books of Night find signs of God’s action. When prayer is no longer functioning the way it once did, but has become tasteless, and the person feels disorientated, reaching out for a God who is no longer showing up: John sees that reaching, that anxiety for God, as a sign of God’s action (N.1,9).

Again, when a person experiences their weakness as never before, feels that they do not fit, that they are unacceptable, all the rubbish in them now floating like jetsam to the



surface: John sees that as a fruit of God tenderly, hiddenly drawing near; a fruit of God's action (N.2,7).

To the question, Where is God? John is answering by pointing to where we felt most needy.

The Wound at the Heart of the World

When in Night John seeks words for the wound that is in him, it is the cries of Israel that surface: the psalms, Lamentations, Job—individuals, who voiced the pain of their people. The wound to which John descends, “Where have you hidden ...?”, connects with the pain of the world. It is as if, deep beneath the surface where we perform and survive,

there lay a reservoir of weakness where we all are one. In his solitary confinement John was accessing a universal cry.

The word John uses in the first stanza of his Canticle conveys this: *gemido*, “Where have you hidden, Beloved, and left me groaning.” In the Prologue to his commentary John speaks of his verses as an echo of the Spirit who pleads for us with a cry too deep for words, *gemidos inefables*. From the wound within him rises the cry of the Spirit. It is a cry which gives voice to the longing of the whole of creation to be set free:

the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God. We know that the whole of creation has been groaning in travail together until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait for adoption . . . (Romans 8:21-23).

In another prison poem, *Romances on the Incarnation*, John pictures humanity longing for the coming of the Bridegroom, begging “with tears and cries” (*lagrimas y gemidos*) for the “companionship” of the Son of God.⁹ Individuals are pictured voicing the Advent prayer of the Church. So it is that those who are taken by God to the place of hunger within them, stand there on behalf of their people. They give voice to the cry, the need, of the universe. Such purified prayer is a source of healing; “a little of this pure love is more precious to God and for the soul, and of more benefit to the Church”—and so, to the world—“than all those other works put together.”¹⁰

Christ is the guarantee of this; the wounded Christ, a brother in our need. So John puts at the head of his treatise *Ascent-Night*

the picture of Jesus reconciling humanity, restoring the universe, by entering the black hole where God seems not to be. John knows an annihilated Christ who was “compelled to cry out My God! My God! Why have you forsaken me? This was the most extreme forsakenness he had felt in his life. And by it he did his greatest work, greater than any he had done in his life . . . That is, he reconciled and united the human race with God. . . .”¹¹

The journey to our poverty, then, is not a private affair; the healing of the world is at stake

Let Your Need Be Your Prayer

This, then, is one of the seasons of prayer in St John of the Cross. We have been led by him to Cana: the family wedding where the wine runs out, Mary sees the anxiety, and has a quiet word with her Son just pointing out what she has noticed.

This is a scene with cosmic scope: the wedding of the Lamb, espousing humanity, a humanity in peril. The mother of Jesus perceives what is lacking, and names it, without dictating a solution: “They have no wine.” Hers is a prayer of need; her perception of need is a prayer. She takes it, holds it, allows it to ache before him. And that precipitates glory. He “manifested his glory, and his disciples believed in him.”

This, then, is a way of prayer: to feel our way to the wound that is in us, to the place of our need. Go there, take it, name it; hold it before Christ.

To feel our way to the wounds of the world, to those people or situations in dire need of healing. Go there, take them, name them, and hold them before him.

Go there, not to dictate to Christ what the

answer should be or what he should do about it; but to hold the wound, before him.

“They have no wine.” John of the Cross sees wisdom here. A love which does not spell out “what it needs or wants, but holds out its need so that the Beloved might do what pleases him” is especially powerful.

And this for three reasons: firstly, because the Lord knows what is best for us, better than we do; second, because the Beloved’s compassion is more deeply moved when he sees the need and the surrender of the one who loves him; third, because the soul is less vulnerable to her self-love and possessiveness when she holds out the need before him than when she spells out her own view of what it is she needs.

This, then, is a way of prayer in St John of the Cross: to go to the place of our need, and hold that before God. “We have no wine:” a service to the world, a prayer that precipitates glory. ■

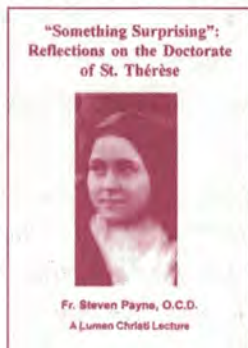
Notes

1. Jose de Jesus Maria Vida de San Juan de la Cruz 111, Burgos (3) 1927, 451. In San Juan de la Cruz: Obras Completas, ed Maximiliano Herraiz, Salamanca 1991, p. 16
2. Sayings of Light and Love 62
3. Magdalena de Espiritu Santo, BMC 10.324 [see note 1]
4. See Monika Hellwig Eucharist and the Hunger of the World, Sheed and Ward, US 1992, p. 5.
5. LB e.18, 22
6. CA 1.6
7. Sayings 15
8. N. 2, 21.5
9. Romances 177
10. CB 29.2
11. 2A 7.11

Mount Carmel, Autumn, 1999

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The Ascent and the Dark Night

Federico Ruiz



These two titles have been joined since the time of Fray John's stay in El Calvario and Beas. There he composed the poem and drew the sketch of Mount Carmel or the "Mount of Perfection." He explained it, made copies, and dedicated it countless times to friars and nuns. These two mustard seeds that seemed in the beginning to be simple means to promote piety within the community were in reality the rich seed of two great works, writings brimming with experience and thought, making John of the Cross the great theologian of mysticism and spirituality.

In reality, they constitute one work, the same project, organized in two parts. As a result, one speaks of the diptych Ascent-Dark Night, two segments of one composition. The two focus on the same themes and experiences and use the same terms. They speak of union with God and likeness to Christ through faith, hope, and love, of poverty of spirit in the presence of God's gifts, and of detachment in the use of external things and the feelings of the heart.

A Didactic and Theological Work

Time and again we have to return to the immediate practical purpose of St. John of the Cross's writings. Even the most elevated and systematic works bear the signs of having arisen and grown within the surroundings of the religious community.

One friar who knew him personally observed the spread and formative efficacy of the sanjuanist writings in the early monasteries of the reform. "They carried in their breviaries some small papers on which were sketched Mount Carmel and how to ascend; the doctrine was about reaching great perfection and was worked out by the said servant of God Fray John of the Cross. Moreover, almost all the friars knew by heart the poem the Dark Night, and they usually sang it during the relaxation period after eating and on other occasions for recreation" (Jose de la Madre de Dios).

In the last sentences of the prologue to the Ascent, which apply also to the Night, the author wrote that his main intention was to address “some of the persons of our holy order of the primitive observance of Mount Carmel, both friars and nuns, whom God favors by putting on the path leading up this mount, since they are the ones who asked me to write this work.” The simplicity of its origin and its didactic style do not hide the quality of John’s mystical experience or the depth of his theological thought. The work Ascent-Dark Night embodies an abyss of spiritual and mystical experience, of introspection and the observation of others. He works with materials firsthand and not only with the received tradition and scholarship. He also brought to his work a strong unity and systematization. He made use of his knowledge of systematic theology and spiritual tradition. On the basis of all this, he created an organic synthesis on Christian perfection, treating of union with God, the following of Christ, and the theological virtues.

He traced the way and process of the gradual transformation that God brings to completion in the believer, converting the old self into the new self, a truly spiritual self; step by step, from the first fervor through the desert of the arid night to the light of the full union of love.

In fact, the Ascent-Night with its experiences and doctrine has left a mark on all later mystical writing. And it continues to be

today the authoritative criterion for judging authentic spirituality.

The Ascent of Mount Carmel

The title alludes to the Sketch of the Mount which the author so often copied and explained, and which was widely distributed among the first friars and nuns. The word “Carmel” evoked thoughts of the vocation of Carmelites, of their Elijan tradition, of the many who over the centuries had become saints in the order. The symbolism of the title is very rich, and furthermore lays bare the meaning and content of the work. In the first place we have a mountain, an elevated place where God approaches and manifests himself to human beings: Horeb, Sinai, Carmel, Tabor. It is the place of theophanies or revelations of God. What this title refers to first of all in the sanjuanist work is not human effort but divine condescension and intimacy with God.

This basic symbol is completed by the image of an ascent. Humans invited by God to communion with him must engage in an arduous climb, withdrawing from all the banalities of ordinary existence, getting rid of the weight of egoism and possessiveness that can hinder the ascent. “As this path on the high mount of perfection is narrow and steep, it demands travelers who are neither weighed down by the lower part of their nature nor burdened in the higher part. This is a venture in which God alone is sought and gained, thus only





God ought to be sought and gained” (A.2.7.3).

In that same chapter 7, John wanted to give to his mount and the ascent a meaning strictly from the gospels. It is the narrow gate and the constricting path to eternal life that our Lord mentions. And it points above all to the unconditional following of Christ along the way of love and the cross.

Synthesis of the Theological Life

The work is divided into three books having respectively 15, 32, and 45 chapters. In the Ascent, a variety of perspectives are mixed together, which give shape to the content and development of the work. It is biblical in its basic sources and positions. Thus it affirms both the continuity and break between the revelation of the Old and of the New Testament; it affirms Christ as the unique and complete Word of God, the law of discipleship, and the precept of love. It is theological in its outline and development, considering the presence of God by nature and grace, the

primordial function of the theological virtues in the union and transformation, the necessity of affective redemption, the infinite God who is blinding to the creature. It is experiential in its subject matter and ultimate intention, dealing with deeply rooted defects and disorders in spiritual persons, the mystical graces granted by God, the use and abuse of religious and profane objects in one's relationship with God. And it is pedagogical, pointing out the gradual stages of development and their practical demands, such as, first fervor, purification of the senses, and the additional exigencies of interior poverty.

For its author, as well as for the reader, this work is both mystical and ascetical. It is mystical because it describes God's generosity in even its most extravagant forms and the work of Christian grace in its most delicate shadings; it is profoundly ascetical because this communion with God demands an attitude of fidelity and surrender, consistency of life, and above all totality of love.

Ideas and Stimuli

What can this classic work offer us today that is interesting and timely? Some reject it or push it aside en bloc because it doesn't correspond to today's religious tastes in subject matter and spiritual terminology. But these are not sufficient reasons for ignoring a work that continues to identify many fundamental points of experience and thought. At various times in its preparatory gatherings and in the council hall, the Second Vatican Council alluded to the pages of the Ascent. The present pontiff, John Paul II, focused on it in his doctoral dissertation in theology.

Here are some of its constant and timely themes: union with God through love as the total meaning of Christian and human existence; the divine gift, human purification; Jesus Christ, God's total revelation and gift, experience and model of total response; faith, hope, and charity, whether considered actively as surrender or passively as gift, the only and complete means of encounter with God; the purification of all affectivity and of the scattered imagination; the clarity of religious practice in its objects and expressions, - the prayer of a silent and simple gaze, loving awareness that stirs so much enthusiasm for this teaching at the present time; the mystical life and its manifestations; criteria for theological discernment, which continue today to be the theological (and canonical) norm in teaching and making judgments about mystical experience.

The Dark Night

Despite the biblical, mystical, and theological riches present in the Ascent, its author was

left doubly dissatisfied: in the first place, because he had not given a true commentary on the poem *The Dark Night*, as he had proposed to do; and above all, because he had not described and explained the disconcerting and painful experience that many spiritual persons pass through on the way of perfection. This experience makes up the central theme of the poem and is the main motive for his writing the work, as he stated in the prologue of the *Ascent*. Thus he felt moved, almost obliged, to write a new work that

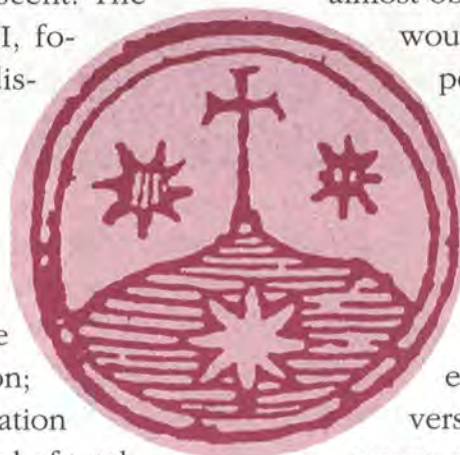
would be a real commentary on the poem *The Dark Night*. The result was a work by this same title, concluded a year after the first was done, that is, in 1586.

Faithful to his initial plan, the commentary on the *Night* keeps contact with the poem, explaining it stanza by stanza, verse by verse. Right away one becomes aware of the harmony existing

between the poetry and the prose, a unity in the experience, vital sources, and lyric tone. With regard to its length and divisions, the author developed his commentary on the verses in an irregular manner. To help readers, the first editor of the works, in 1618, divided this writing into two books of 14 and 25 chapters.

Life and Theology

From the viewpoint of language the symbol *Dark Night* is commonly considered the most effective one in the sanjuanist writings. In it we find sensible perception, human intuition, and spiritual experience intimately related. Thanks to this interconnection among them, each evokes and empowers the others. During his life, Fray John experienced the night



in all its forms and tonalities: the joy of contemplating, being silent, and perceiving the nearness of God, the suffering from being alone and in poverty, and from the confinement in the dismal cell in Toledo; the interminable contemplation for so many hours in Baeza, Granada, and Segovia.

At once the difference between this symbol and the image “ascent” becomes apparent. The night cannot be programmed; it demands passivity more than effort. It limits activity, hides objects, augments danger, and converts everything into strange, frightening silhouettes. Yet, at the same time it also protects and helps those hiding from their enemies. All these meanings and allusions served John well in his description of the spiritual experience of a person who feels lost and very far from God. The dark night has a twofold modality, negative and positive. Negative, because it hides everything; one feels incapable of working; God has hidden; prayer becomes tasteless; life has no meaning. Positive, because, thanks to this aridity and darkness, the soul can walk free of so many enemies that habitually hindered it in its times of spiritual well-being: calculations, demands, attachments, pastimes, and curiosity.

Description and Explanation

Helped by the symbol, Fray John presents a description and explanation of this desolate experience. He describes with beauty and precision the beginning of what we call the



passive night. When these beginners have left worldly things and have procured some spiritual strength “they will be able to suffer a little oppression and dryness without turning back. Consequently, it is at the time they are going about their spiritual exercises with delight and satisfaction . . . that God leaves them in such darkness they do not know which way to turn in their discursive imaginings . . . and in such dryness that they not only fail to receive satisfaction and pleasure from their spiritual exercises and works, as they formerly did, but also find these exercises distasteful and bitter” (N. 1. 8.3).

This experience gradually becomes more profound and all-embracing. And it ends by

absorbing the whole person in all the faculties. It is a “living death,” as John says. In its most intense form one remains without plans, without impulses, and without desire to live.

What purpose could so radical a pruning have? The interesting point is that the spirit is incapacitated, has no appetite even for spiritual things, such as, prayer, love of neighbor, and apostolic creativity. Following John’s thought, we can respond to the question in phases.

First, the distinction between good and evil objects, licit and illicit ones, is of little use here. Inordinate attachments also feed on spiritual objects and seek satisfaction in them. John presents a good explanation of this in the first chapters of the Night (1.17). The seven capital vices come into play with pious objects in an apparently spiritual way.

Second, if affectivity and the discursive function are left dry and inactive, the bad habits contracted through their use are uprooted. A paralysis in our spontaneous tendencies is enough to purify or disinfect them of the egoism of the old self. One can then begin the new life with the form and strength of the theological virtues.

Third, what seems on the surface to be a paralysis is in reality the divine activity, which transforms and renews from within. Also, the individual can perceive signs of the improvement that is interiorly being accomplished: “Thus, while the spirit is tasting, the flesh tastes nothing at all and becomes weak in its work. But the spirit through this nour-



ishment grows stronger and more alert, and becomes more solicitous than before about not failing God” (N.1.9.4).

Experiences

Many find in their own lives a verification in broadstrokes of the experience John calls the “dark night.” From the Old Testament up to our own day, God repeats this same pedagogy, purifying and sanctifying by the way of the cross. John proposes great biblical models; for example, David, Jeremiah, and Job. “We could adduce numerous passages from Sacred Scripture, for since this sensory purgation is so customary, we find a great many references to it throughout, especially in the Psalms and the Prophets” (N.1.8.5).

John thus wrote in order to direct persons who receive this grace, but do not profit by it because of cowardice, ignorance, or bad advice from other spiritual teachers.

This same dark night, uncovered and analyzed by John of the Cross serves many today as a frame of reference for understanding the personal and collective situation in which we must live. Above all, it encourages them to carry the cross of Christ faithfully in the midst of confusion, weakness, and obscurity. ■

Father Denis of the Holy Family, O.C.D.



Fr. Denis of the Holy Family (William “Bill” Read) 77, a Discalced Carmelite Friar of the Washington Province was born to eternal life on Monday October 18, 2004 in Miami Florida. Son of the late Edwin Read and Helen McGee Read, Fr. Denis was born July 19, 1927 in Seattle Washington. His parents and brothers, Thomas, Richard and John Paul Read, predecease him. He is survived by sister Carol Read and brothers David (Margaret), Edwin (Kathryn), Joseph and Rev. Ignacio Read, OCD.

He entered the Order of Discalced Carmelites Oct 14, 1944, made his simple profession of vows on Oct 15, 1945 and solemn profession of vows Oct 15, 1948 in Washington D.C., where he was also ordained to the priesthood on December 20, 1952.

From 1953 to 1956 Fr. Denis was the rector of the Discalced Carmelite minor seminary in Peterborough, New Hampshire. From 1956 through 1966 he served in several capacities including; retreat master and formation director at Holy Hill and as associate pastor of St. Mary of the Hill Parish (1960 - 1966). In 1969 Fr. Denis received his doctorate in Moral Theology from the Academia Alfonsiana in Rome. He was an associate professor at the Catholic University of America from 1969-1972 and a full professor at St. John’s Seminary in Plymouth Michigan from 1972-1974. He also taught at St. Joseph’s Seminary in San Jose California from 1974-1975 and served as associate pastor of St. Margaret’s parish in Tucson Arizona. He returned to Holy Hill and was retreat director there from 1978 through 1982. From 1983-1986 he was the associate pastor at St. Joseph’s parish in Waukesha. During 1987-1990 he was the associate pastor of St. Florian’s parish in West Milwaukee. In 1990-1997 Fr. Denis served once again as retreat director at Holy Hill. From 1997 to the time of his death he was involved at Our Lady of Mt. Carmel Spiritual Center in Miami Florida where he served in ministry to the Secular Order and was involved in Hispanic and retreat ministry.

A funeral mass was celebrated Friday October 22nd at Visitation Church with Archbishop Favalora of Miami as the main celebrant. Evening prayer was celebrated at Holy Hill National Shrine of Mary, Help of Christians on Sunday Oct 24th in the Shrine Chapel. A concelebrated funeral Mass was held on Monday Oct 25th in the Chapel of St. Therese, burial followed in the Carmelite cemetery at Holy Hill. ■

FRIENDS OF TERESA St. Francis Borja

Fr. Regis Jordan, O.C.D.

The esteem which St. Teresa had for the Society of Jesus (Jesuits) grew from her first contact with them in Avila. From then on she often had Jesuits as her confessors or advisors.

One of the most prestigious Jesuits was St. Francis Borja, one of the original followers of St. Ignatius. Although her contact with him was very brief it was very intense. It also came at a very opportune time when Teresa needed discernment regarding the mystical phenomena she was beginning to experience. She did not need theoretical understanding, but a master with experience of God operating in the life of believers.

His Life

Francis was born in 1510 in Gandia, Valencia. He was the son of Don Juan, the third duke of Gandia and Dona Juana de Aragon. His life, from the time he was a youth, developed in the court of the Emperor Charles V and his wife Elizabeth. He married Leonora de Castro, lady-in-waiting of the Empress, he had eight children and became a widower in 1546. He was Viceroy of Catalonia from 1539-1543.

Two sad events decided his destiny: the death of the Empress Elizabeth in 1538 in the fullness of life at 36; and the death of his wife



in 1546. The first strengthened his already deep religiosity, practiced even in the midst of the court. It made him reflect on the frailty of earthly goods and the emptiness of high social standing.

The second event decided his entry into the Society of Jesus, secretly in 1546 and publically from 1550. It was an event which caused much turmoil in the opinion of the Spanish public, given his social status.

His progress in the Society was very rapid. He was professed in 1548, and ordained a priest in 1551. He was commissioner of the Jesuit province of Spain and Portugal in 1554 and elected general of the Society in 1565. He died in Rome in 1572. His was an extraordinary life. His interior life was shown in a profound piety, dedication of a life of prayer and penance, to the governing of the Society and the apostolic works of preaching and spiritual writing.

His Writings

Despite the heavy responsibilities he had his entire life, Francis was a prolific writer. He wrote over seventy works, the majority being short works published in available editions. One of his most frequent themes was prayer. Not only did he write a treatise on prayer, but he wrote about prayer at every opportunity, insisting on its necessity. He has a special place in the history of prayer in the 16th cen-



tury by proposing as material for meditation the liturgical texts for each day of the week, joining personal and solitary prayer with the public prayer of the Church. Thus was created an extensive work, unpublished until the 20th century, entitled: Meditations on the Gospel: Meditations for all the Sundays and Days of the Year and Principal Feasts. Other traditional themes Francis wrote about can be summarized as: the exercise of prayer, self-knowledge, and the mysteries of Christ and the Trinity. An essential work for the understanding of the intimate life and history of the Society of Jesus and the Spanish 16th century are his Letters and Spiritual Diary.

Teresa and Francis

There is no doubt that Teresa and Francis met in Avila. However the exact date is not

known. It appears that she may have had two sessions with him on one of his visits to Avila in 1557.

Regarding her meetings with him she writes in the Life:

“At that time Father Francis came to this place. He had been the Duke of Gandia, and some years before had given up all and entered the Society of Jesus. My confessor, and the gentleman I also mentioned who came to me, arranged that I might speak with him and give him an account of my prayer because I knew that he was advancing in the favors and gifts of God. Since he was one who had abandoned many things for Him, God repaid him even in this life.

Well, after he had heard me, he told me that my experience was from the

There comes a time when one must, at the urging of the Holy Spirit, stop resisting and surrender to His prompting. St. Francis assured her that this time had come. If she were to advance along the path to mystical union she must surrender.

Spirit of God and that it seemed to him it would no longer be good to resist, but that up to this time it had been all right, and that I should always begin prayer with an event from the Passion, but that if afterward the Lord should carry away the spirit, I ought not resist Him, but let His Majesty bear it away—and not strive to do so myself. As one who was well advanced he gave the medicine and the counsel, for experience in this matter is very important. He said it would be a mistake to resist any longer.

I was left greatly consoled. The gentleman too was very glad that Father Francis said it was from God, and this gentleman helped me and gave me advice in matters where he could, which were many”(L24.3).

We can see that this was a turning point in how Teresa was to handle her extraordinary favors and the gifts she was receiving from God. It would seem that her confessors were counseling her to resist these favors and gifts because of the danger involved. St. Francis, however, saw that it was now time to allow God to bear her spirit away. But he

also cautioned her that she was not to strive to do this herself, but to let the Lord do it. This counsel set Teresa free to soar under the influence of the Spirit to the heights of the mystical life.

In St. Francis Borja we find another “friend” of Teresa there at the opportune time in her spiritual journey. There comes a time when one must, at the urging of the Holy Spirit, stop resisting and surrender to His prompting. St. Francis assured her that this time had come. If she were to advance along the path to mystical union she must surrender. Few as the meetings between these two great saints were they had a profound influence on Teresa’s spiritual journey and through her on the mystical theology of the Church. ■

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