

## John of the Cross: One Like Ourselves

From August 29 to September 12, 2002, I had the good fortune of visiting Spain with a group of scholars who belong to the Carmelite Forum. The group was composed of two members of the cloistered Carmelite nuns, three Discalced friars, and three members of the ancient observance (O.Carm.). We were given this trip by a gracious student from our seminars.

Our plan was to visit the places sacred to St. Teresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross. Because of Carmelite connections we were able to enter the inner-sancta of these places, so we had the opportunity to meet Teresa and John on their own turf. John came alive for me. I have always loved him, but I never had the sense of his humanity I now have, and I would like to share that with you.

John was born in 1542, fifty years after the discovery of America, and he died forty-nine years later, in 1591. So he lived long ago and far away. To most people he is an ascetic, forbidding figure, who has little in common with ordinary earthlings. American scholars of mysticism in the early nineteen-hundreds, men like William James and Dean Inge, saw him as a misanthrope and world-hater. Nothing could be further from the truth. In mid-century new translations of his works, by E. Allison Peers and the biographies of Crisogono and Bruno, made available in English--and then a little later, the ICS Publications translations by Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez--helped shift the understanding of American readers. The new interest was followed by the good work of many scholars. But we waited until *God Speaks in the Night* (ICS

Publications, 1991), a collective effort of many Discalced scholars, to give us a full story on John of the Cross. This book relativizes other biographies of John and offers the picture of a warm, attractive human being in love with God but very much a citizen of this world.

This picture came to life for me on our trip to Spain. I see John now as an all-around person, talented in many ways and sensitive in personality, one whose life was as busy and involved as most of his readers today. This image of John comes through especially in the last quarter of his life, which took place largely in the south of Spain. We began our journey there, headquartering in Granada in a hotel for pilgrims and tourists run by the Carmelites of the Ancient Observance (O.Carm.), who have a monastery next door. We took daily trips from there to the places and monuments of John of the Cross in Andalusia.

### John of the Cross, a Transplant from Castile

The image of John as a busy worker occupied with secular as well as spiritual business came through over and over again in these the next four days. The south was not his native land nor his favorite country. He grew up in Castile and that is where his heart lay. It may come as a surprise to those who think that a saint's detachment means no preferences, no human feelings. John gives the lie to that view. Saints are full of deep feelings; the difference is that feelings

do not control them. The feelings remain and they deal with them.

John was not a “happy camper” in Andalusia, at least in the beginning. Even after several years there living in the province of Jaen--first in El Calvario, then in Baeza--and finally in Granada in the monastery of Los Martires, John still looked to the north and yearned for his own land of Castile. He enlisted St. Teresa’s help asking her to use her influence with the new provincial, Jerome Gracian, who was very close to Teresa, to get him transferred back north. Gracian ignored the request. Four months later the year was 1581 John wrote to a nun in Castile, who missed the presence of Mother Teresa:

“Be consoled with the thought that you are not as abandoned and alone as I am down here. For after that whale swallowed me up and vomited me out on this alien port, I have never merited to see her again or the saints up there.” [*God Speaks in the Night*, p. 211]

John quickly finds a moral here about abandonment being a gift of God: "God has done well, for, after all, abandonment is a file and the endurance of darkness leads to great light" (Ibid.). Politically it was better for him to remain out of harm’s way in the south, and he was needed there.

Not all the memories from the early years in Castile, however, were happy ones. His childhood was hard in spite of the warm love that pervaded the household. Grinding poverty marked his beginnings, with the loss of his father and one brother by premature deaths and the struggle to eke out a living with a single parent and one older brother in

Medina del Campo. John was industrious and found odd jobs to help his family, culminating in employment as a teenager in the local hospital for infectious diseases. John’s dedication and compassion impressed the director of the hospital, who sponsored him in the four-year classical education with the Jesuits. He was also a familiar figure at the Carmelite friars in town.

When he decided to enter religious life, he chose the Carmelites over the Jesuits and the many other orders in Medina. After initial studies and novitiate at his home base, he went to the Carmelite college at Salamanca, where he was ordained a priest in 1567. As a young Carmelite priest of twenty-five years, he met St. Teresa who was fifty-two at the time. She was about the task of founding the second convent of nuns of the reform. She had permission to extend the reform to the friars, and she found her first candidate in John. He accepted her invitation to join, instead of pursuing the thought of leaving the Carmelites for the Carthusians, Aprovided it didn't take too long.@

For almost ten years he was a spiritual leader in the reform and lived in relative peace. Then conflicts and misunderstandings erupted, culminating in personal persecution and imprisonment in Toledo. Our group visited all these places in Castile in the second part of our journey, after we had moved north and taken up residence in the former diocesan seminary in Avila. But Teresa of Jesus dominated our consciousness from our headquarters in Avila. The new image of John of the Cross was the revelation from the south.

## **John in Andalusia**

John had fled south after his escape from the prison cell in Toledo in 1578, and his first residence was El Calvario, a desert house in the rugged mountains north of Granada, far away from human habitation. John was there as the new superior and he remained nine months, from November 1578 to June 1579. After being cooped up in the prison cell, he must have thrilled to the open spaces. One of his first tasks was to moderate the exaggerated penances and austerities promoted by his predecessor, Pedro de los Angeles, and seek ways to provide the necessities of life for his poverty-stricken group of thirty friars. John's strategy for the latter was to trust God to send benefactors and at the same time to lead the community into the fields for some farming of their own.

El Calvario is only a spot on the map now, but then the monastery stood on a steep hill overlooking the valley below with undulating mountains on three sides. Some old sheds and a caretaker's cottage are all that remain from the past. The road is bumpy and steep; and it takes its toll on a car. The trek up must have been tortuous by foot. The road reminded me of the trip up Mount Tabor in the Holy Land or the switchbacks at Big Sur in California on the way to the Camaldolese hermitages. Hermits seem to love high places.

The view at El Calvario is magnificent. It is easy to trace the path taken by John every weekend to minister to the nuns at Beas. The convent of Beas was some seven miles away. The nuns became John's second community and his primary external ministry. He would leave early Friday or Saturday morning, go down the steep hill and up the other side, stop for a rest on top, and then continue on down into

the town and to the nuns. John went there every weekend for Sunday Mass and the spiritual direction of the nuns. He would retrace his steps home on Monday.

Beas was one of St. Teresa's convents, and her dear friend and colleague, Anne of Jesus Lobera, was superior. Anne was taken aback by John's too-easy familiarity in referring to La Madre as Amy daughter--La Madre was sixty-three at this time and John was thirty-six. Anne wrote a letter of complaint to Teresa, who responded in strong terms, calling the objections absurd and stating how much she missed him:

"I have not found in all Castile anyone like him or anyone who inspires people with so much fervor on the road to heaven. You would not believe how lonely his absence makes me feel... Let my daughters speak to him.... as they would with me, and doing so will bring them great satisfaction." [*God Speaks*, p. 197]

Anne soon discovered the sterling qualities of John, and a deep friendship developed between them. Within a year, however, John was called away on another apostolic venture for the order, the establishment of a house of studies in the nearby university town of Baeza. Baeza was chosen as the site because of the university and also because of the piety and fervor in the whole city through the influence of the evangelist and great apostle of Andalusia, St. John of Avila. A charismatic spirit flourished everywhere. People in the street and children in the playgrounds went about singing selections from the catechism or psalms and hymns. The university fostered

learning but it was pastoral in spirit. John melded easily into this ferment. He met with teachers and students in scholastic disputations and moral cases as an intellectual equal, and the Carmelite church became a mecca of sacramental ministry, with John drawing the longest lines. The pulpit in the cathedral has a plaque indicating that it was graced by John's preaching.

And with all this spiritual ministry, John also engaged in the manual labor of moving walls and adapting buildings for the monastery. His tenure in Baeza was brief, only four years, from 1579 to 1582, at which time he was sent as superior to the Granada monastery. The monastery was eventually located at "Los Martires."

The name Los Martires came from the site where Christians had been thrown into pits and martyred by the Moors. It was next to the Alhambra, the masterpiece of Moorish art and architecture. John began truly busy days at this point, weighed down with the spiritual and physical tasks of directing the community, upgrading the house, and carrying out his other responsibilities as definitor and vicar provincial. These latter offices involved extensive travel.

As for travel, it is calculated that over his lifetime John put seventeen thousand miles on his pedometer. Note, the calculation is not on a speedometer or the air miles of a frequent flyer, but a *pedibus*, i.e., on foot and only occasionally by donkey or mule. He wore several hats--local superior, spiritual director, teacher, writer, architect and workman--all the while maintaining an observant religious life. John spent six years at Los Martires in Granada, 1582-1588, and they were filled with spiritual ministry as

well as the secular tasks of expanding the monastery, building an aqueduct to bring water from the Alhambra to the house and gardens, and generally improving the property.

John was in his prime at this time--age 40--not overly strong but vigorous and energetic. His immediate concern was Los Martires itself. The house was too small and the terrain arid and empty. With both political finesse in getting clearances and financing, plus exercising technical skills in planning and drawing blueprints and actually working on the construction, John was the key figure in the improvements of the property. His special contribution was the aqueduct, which still stands. One time an ecclesiastic came to see him and found him in a muddy and torn habit looking exactly like the other workers. The cleric said: "You are just another working man." "I am less than a working man," said John; "I am just a poor weaver's son" (cf. *God Speaks*, p. 244).

Granada is the place of his greatest literary production. He produced his four major treatises there and several minor ones in piecemeal fashion over the six year period. Two of the works, *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* and *Dark Night*, are didactic and theological, and two others, *Spiritual Canticle* and *The Living Flame of Love*, are mystical outpourings. All these works are prose commentaries on his own poems.

## A Subplot

A subplot in this literary history is a human interest story involving his two special female friends, Anne of Jesus and a second Ann, Ana of Peñalosa. John had composed most of the poem "Cantico" in the

prison at Toledo, but he waited until these years to write the *Spiritual Canticle*, a verse by verse commentary. He dedicated the commentary to his friend Sister Anne of Jesus, indicating in the prologue that she knew by experience what he was talking about in the abstract.

Ana of Peñalosa was a noble lady and widow, presently living in Granada, away from her roots in Segovia. Her presence in Granada and her generosity saved the day for the new foundation of nuns there. When they arrived from the north with their new superior, Anne of Jesus, and their guide and chaplain, John of the Cross, they found that the housing that had been carefully arranged beforehand was not available. Ana opened her home to the homeless community, who stayed as guests for a whole year.

Doña Ana and Sister Anne of Jesus, along with their mentor, John of the Cross, were a holy triangle of friends. The friendship did not impede a certain rivalry between the two women. When John dedicated the *Spiritual Canticle* to Anne of Jesus, Doña Ana complained that she had no poem or book addressed to her. John promised to correct the matter. He composed the beautiful poem, "Living Flame of Love," with its magnificent commentary and dedicated the two compositions to the noble lady. Obviously, exalted mystical experience did not remove these holy people from the human condition.

## Back to Castile

A chapter meeting of the reform in 1588 finally sent John back to Castile as prior of Segovia, a beautiful royal city northwest of Avila. Of all the places we

visited, Segovia is my favorite site. The monastery and gardens are icons of John's work. The monastery has an idyllic setting at the edge of the city. Rich gardens surround it, and two monuments of the historic past, the great cathedral and the Alcazar or state castle, stand as sentinels overlooking the sacred grounds. The scene is the picture used on the cover of the book *God Speaks in the Night*, a good choice since the whole scene bears the imprint of John of the Cross.)

Segovia brought out John's talents and stands as a final monument to him. The monastery that John rebuilt and Ana of Penalosa financed is John's masterpiece. Here are living memories of John the architect, John the builder, John the man of prayer, and John the spiritual director. John expanded the monastery, built an aqueduct, and planned and executed the amazing cloister in the quadrangle inside the monastery garden. The arches of the cloister are large and expansive, and fairly breathe welcome and life. No small-minded person could have conceived them. They are a creation in stone to match the splendors of his poetry. John planned and built another aqueduct that still stands on the property.

The property in Segovia has spacious gardens and numerous caves that John secured for meditation and prayer. As we survey this natural grandeur, we can hear verses of the "Cantico," which were written before Segovia but which resonate with this local beauty:

Let us rejoice, Beloved,  
and let us go forth to behold  
ourselves in your beauty.  
To the mountain and to the hill,  
to where the pure water flows,  
and further, deep into the thicket.

And then we will go on/  
to the high caverns in the rock  
which are so well concealed:/  
there we shall enter and taste  
the fresh juice of the pomegranates.  
(35-36)

Segovia was a three-year appointment, and John expected to be returned there for a second term. Instead, the chapter at Madrid in 1591 divested him of his offices. He was a *persona non grata* to the autocratic superior-general, Nicholas Doria, and to many of the friars. John represented the thinking of La Madre, who was dead and only a memory to Doria who focused more on observance and austerity than on her gracious ideas of religious life. John spoke up for Teresa's views regarding the close collaboration she wanted between the friars and the nuns and in defense of her dear friend, Jerome Gracian, who was despised by Doria and eventually expelled from the reform. John knew that these were unpopular views and that his faithfulness to Teresa would cost him his place in the reform. He wrote to one of the nuns before the chapter: "They will throw me in a corner like an old dishrag" (*God Speaks*, p.350). And so it happened.

This good little man offered his name as a volunteer for a proposed Mexican mission. He went to the desert house La Peñuela, again in the south and not far from El Calvario, to await passage to Mexico. The next months were happy ones for him. When his friends complained about his fate, he replied, "Don't waste your tears; I finally have what I have wanted all my life: blessed solitude and time to pray." To another who lamented the unkindness heaped upon him, John wrote those famous words: "This is all

God's doing. Where you don't find love put love and you will find love."

John's life was cut short by a sudden, life-threatening sickness. He was moved to an obscure monastery in Ubeda where he died, amid persecution from the community but in utter peace, on December 14, 1591. His body was later removed at night and enthroned in state in the chapter at Segovia, again through the influence of Ana of Peñalosa. But that is another story and must wait for another time.

### Role Model

The saint who emerges from this simple, matter-of-fact account is not the other-worldly avatar from heaven who comes out of an older hagiography. The real John of the Cross is an attractive, committed human being, whose life was much like our own: busy, unpredictable, demanding in responsibilities and challenges, and remarkable only for his extraordinary love relationship with God and his service of others. It is for this reason that he is a role model for serious Christians in every walk of life. His secret was contemplation. Contemplation was the life-giving stream that fueled his prayer, his community life, and his ministry. His contemplation was like a gyroscope that kept him centered, balanced, full of peace and joy no matter what the ups and downs of his existence. We can be kindred spirits with this wonderful "little Seneca," as Teresa called him. We need only open the treasures of his legacy and find in his life and writings expert guidance from one who has been there before us.

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