



General Introduction to the Collected Works of St. John of the Cross

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The Early Years

On an unknown day, the month uncertain, in 1542, Juan de Yepes was born in a small town called Fontiveros. It lay on rocky and barren land in the central plateau of Old Castile midway between Madrid and Salamanca. With a population of about 5,000, the town included some small weaving shops. Juan's father, Gonzalo de Yepes, who belonged to a wealthy family of silk merchants in Toledo, had stopped in Fontiveros on a business journey to Medina del Campo, and there met Catalina Alvarez, a weaver of poor and humble background. Despite the difference in their status, the two fell in love and married in 1529. Shocked and disturbed by what they considered shameful — a marriage to a girl of low position — the merchant family disinherited Gonzalo. Deprived of financial security, he had to adapt to the drudgery of the poor, which in his case meant the lowly trade of weaving. Under these trying circumstances, both Gonzalo and Catalina had to find strength in their mutual friendship and intimacy. The couple had three sons: Francisco, Luis, and the youngest, Juan (later to be known as St. John of the Cross). But John was little more than two years old when his father died, worn out from the terrible suffering of a long illness. Reduced to penury, the young widow — afflicted but courageous — set out with hope on a tiring journey to visit the wealthy members of her husband's family, to beg assistance in her dire need. Rejected by them, she had to manage as best she could on her own in Fontiveros. During this time John's brother Luis died, perhaps as a result of insufficient nourishment. Catalina then felt constrained to try elsewhere, abandoning her little home and moving to Arévalo, where things were hardly an improvement, and finally to Medina del Campo, the bustling market center of Castile, where she resumed her work of weaving.

Here John entered a school for poor children where he received an elementary education, principally of Christian doctrine, and had the opportunity to become an apprentice in some trade or profession. The school resembled an orphanage where the children received food, clothing, and lodging. At this time, the priest who was the director of the school chose John to serve as an acolyte at La Magdalena, a nearby monastery of Augustinian nuns. While on duty, the young boy assisted in the sacristy for four hours in the morning, and in the afternoons whenever the superior, the chaplain, or the sacristan needed him. As for the apprenticeships — in carpentry, tailoring, sculpturing, and painting — John showed no enthusiasm. Rather, his gentleness and patience led to the discovery of his gift for compassion toward the sick. Don Alonso Alvarez, administrator of the hospital in Medina for poor people with the plague or other contagious diseases, took an interest in John and enlisted his services as nurse and alms-collector. Don Alonso also provided John with the opportunity for further study. At age 17, the bright young lad enrolled at the Jesuit school, where lectures in grammar, rhetoric, Latin, and Greek were the rule. The future poet came in contact with Latin and Spanish classics, a contact that was anything but superficial, since the Jesuits insisted on high standards and an abundance of exercises, reading, and composition. Becoming acquainted with classical imagery, the gifted pupil learned about literary technique and opened himself to the world around him. These years of hospital work and study, tasks that called for responsibility and diligence, complemented John's early experiences of poverty.



Carmelite Vocation

When John finished his studies, Don Alonso offered him a secure future: ordination to the priesthood and the post of chaplain at the hospital. In turn, the young man could have then assisted his mother and brother out of their poverty, a goal toward which he must have felt the strongest urgings. The Jesuits, who appreciated his intellectual gifts and piety, also made their overtures. But surprisingly, in 1563, at age 21, John entered the Carmelite novitiate recently founded in Medina. What prompted this unexpected decision was probably Carmel's contemplative spirit and its devotion to Mary, the mother of God. Receiving the name Fray (Brother) John of St. Matthias, he passed his novitiate year, we can suppose, studying the Carmelite Rule and the order's ancient spirituality. In *The Book of the First Monks*, a medieval Carmelite work on the spirit of the order that John must have pondered over during his novitiate, the following teaching stands out:

The goal of this life is twofold. One part we acquire, with the help of divine grace, through our efforts and virtuous works. This is to offer God a pure heart, free from all stain of actual sin. We do this when we are perfect and in Cherith, that is, hidden in that charity of which the Wise Man says: "Charity covers all sins" [Prov. 10:12]. God desired Elijah to advance thus far when he said to him: "Hide yourself by the brook Cherith" [1 Kgs. 17:3-4]. The other part of the goal of this life is granted us as the free gift of God: namely, to taste somewhat in the heart and to experience in the soul, not only after death but even in this mortal life, the intensity of the divine presence and the sweetness of the glory of heaven. This is to drink of the torrent of the love of God. God promised it to Elijah in the words: "You shall drink from the brook." It is in view of this double end that the monk ought to give himself to the eremitic and prophetic life.

It must have been toward the end of 1564 that John of St. Matthias, after his novitiate year, arrived in Salamanca for studies in philosophy and theology. The sight of the university town with its churches and cathedrals, palaces and lordly estates undoubtedly thrilled him. In its period of greatest splendor, the university of Salamanca boasted professors of high prestige, large numbers of students from all parts of Spain, an emphasis on biblical and theological studies, and a variety of schools of thought. It ranked with the great universities of Bologna, Paris, and Oxford. There you would find Fray Luis de León, who taught theology in the chair of Durando; Mancio de Corpus Christi, a worthy successor of Vitoria and of Melchor Cano, who held the chair of Prime, the most important in the university; the Augustinian Juan de Guevara, who gave the afternoon lecture and whose explanations were called miraculous; Gregorio Gallo, in place of Domingo Soto, who took over the chair of Sacred Scripture; and Cristóbal Vela, who gave lectures on Scotus. John's name appears on the matriculation records in the school of arts for three years. Knowledge has reached us about the courses that were offered there and the names of the eminent men who held professorships. Master Enrique Hernández, the author of a treatise on philosophy, taught the classes in natural philosophy; Francisco Navarro held the chair of ethics; Hernando Aguilera, who had worked out an astrolabe, reigned in the chair of astronomy; Francisco Sanchez taught grammar and even today is considered an authority on this subject; Master Martin de Peralta explained the *Summulas* (an introduction to logic); and Juan de Ubredo held the chair of music. The statutes of the university prescribed the works of Aristotle for the arts course, but this merely meant that a text from the Philosopher was to be read at the beginning of the lecture; the professor could then go on to interpret it with full liberty, if not leave it aside entirely. It is not known, though, which classes John actually followed in the arts course.

In the school year 1567-68, John registered in theology. Again, no record tells of the courses he took. He would probably have assisted at the Prime lecture, which went on for an hour and a half, beginning early in the morning. At this lecture, the Dominican Mancio de Corpus Christi explained the *Summa theologiae* of St. Thomas Aquinas. He followed the method and style of the Dominican school initiated by Vitoria and Cano. It comprised a return to the sources (Sacred Scripture, the Fathers of the Church, and Aquinas) along with a concern for dealing with new themes and contemporary questions. This theology was expressed in sober and direct language. Whether John might have attended Gaspar Grajal's lectures in Sacred Scripture is a matter for speculation. At the time there was a lively struggle within the university over the interpretation of Scripture. The "scholastics," tenacious partisans of fidelity to the biblical tradition of the preceding centuries, opposed the "scripturists," who sought the literal sense of Scripture through development of scientific methods and the study of languages. Grajal was prominent among the "scripturists" and later, because of his ideas, was sent to prison for a time by the Inquisition.



Besides studies at the university, the Carmelite students, like all religious, had to study at home the doctors belonging to their own order, especially John Baconthorp (c. 1290-1348) — a grandnephew of Roger Bacon — who had taught at the University of Cambridge.

We are told that Fray John was remarkable for his "outstanding talent" and application, testimony bolstered by his appointment as prefect of studies while still a student. With this office went the obligation to teach class daily, defend public theses, and resolve objections that were raised. But for some reason the brilliant young Carmelite was dissatisfied. Was it with the academic atmosphere where the pursuit of knowledge too easily turned into a pursuit of self-exaltation, a quest for titles, chairs, promotions, and awards? Was John beginning to discern there a stubborn attachment to familiar systems of thought, and a reluctance to admit the ultimate inadequacy of all speculations? Was this what he had sought in making his vows? In any case, his horizons lay elsewhere; he found his attention turning frequently to the purely contemplative Carthusians. Though John enjoyed his studies, the contemplative life that had originally attracted him to Carmel was now struggling for first place.



The Teresian Ideal

In 1567, at the time of this vocational crisis, Fray John was ordained a priest and came to Medina to sing his first Mass. There, in the early part of autumn, the fateful meeting with Madre Teresa de Jesús took place. In the city for the foundation of a second community of nuns who would make profession of the Carmelite life according to the new contemplative style that she had developed in Avila, the determined Madre was now weighing the possibility of extending this mode of life to the friars. Having been told of John's exceptional qualities, she arranged for an interview with him. She was 52 at the time; he was 25. Hearing about his aspirations toward more solitude and prayer and about his thought of transferring to the Carthusians, she pointed out to him that he could find all he was seeking without leaving "Our Lady's order," and with her characteristic zeal and friendliness she spoke to him animatedly of her plan to adapt this new way of life for friars. Fray John listened, he felt inspired, caught the enthusiasm, and beheld a new future opening before him. He promised to join Teresa, but on one condition — that he would not have long to wait. Teresa rejoiced over the eagerness of her young recruit and his unwillingness to delay, he who was later to write a treatise on how to reach union with God quickly. The following year, in August, she set off with a small group from Medina to Valladolid, where she intended to make another foundation; and traveling with them to learn more about this new Carmelite life was Fray John, now finished with his studies.

Teresa's ideal of founding small communities, in contrast to her former monastery of the Incarnation at Avila where as many as 180 nuns lived, had its background in a larger movement of reform that had spread through sixteenth-century Spain. Certain common characteristics marked the spirit of this Spanish reform: the return to one's origins, primitive rules, and founders; a life lived in community with practices of poverty, fasting, silence, and enclosure; and, as the most important part, the life of prayer. People used different terms to designate the new communities that had these traits: reformed, observant, recollect, discalced, hermit, contemplative. The name "discalced" became the popular one in referring to Teresa's nuns and friars because of their practice of wearing sandals rather than shoes. These efforts at reforming religious life began in the fifteenth century in response to the upheavals in religious life caused by the Black Death. The early attempts carried an anti-intellectual strain, placing emphasis on affectivity, external ceremonies, devotions, and community vocal prayer. But long hours of community vocal prayer day after day became tedious and mechanical. The only noticeable fruit was the desire for something different, more time for interior prayer. As a matter of fact, a new practice called "recollection," whose followers were called "recogidos," developed in many Franciscan houses. This spirituality made union with God through love its most important concern, seeking nourishment in Scripture and classic spiritual works. These latter works — by authors such as Augustine, Gregory the Great, Bernard, and Bonaventure — appeared in print at the time from newly established presses. The Franciscan friar Francisco de Osuna elaborated this spirituality in *The Third Spiritual Alphabet*, a book that inspired Teresa and initiated her into the way of interior prayer. Osuna taught that to advance spiritually you must practice recollection in imitation of Jesus Christ, who went alone into the desert to pray secretly. By this recollection, also called mental prayer, Osuna explained, you withdraw from people and noise and enter within yourself. But the mystical graces God began to give Teresa (despite her waverings and after she persevered for many years through countless struggles to devote two hours to mental prayer each day) taught her more than all her books. Only with Jesus Christ could she enter the inner castle through prayer; there he became increasingly present as she advanced toward the inmost dwelling place. Presence to Christ was what made prayer for Teresa, in the beginning stages, in the middle, and in the highest as well. "Never leave Christ in whom the human and divine are joined, and who is always one's companion," she warned the theologians who began to come to her to learn about contemplation. "He is the one through whom all blessings come. He is always looking at you; can you not turn the eyes of your soul to look at him?" Her communities, too, had no meaning without Jesus Christ in the center. They were to be small communities; only 12 nuns at first, gathered around Christ as his friends. No class distinctions! These class divisions characterized women's cloisters in those times, ruled by the nobility, as was the case at the Incarnation. In Jesus Christ all were to be equal, Teresa insisted, and the superior the first to take her turn sweeping the floor.

By this time the Madre had written two books of her own: one for her spiritual directors, her *Life*, in which she carefully analyzed all the stages of prayer and explained many of the mystical graces given her by God, bearing testimony that His Majesty never tires of giving; the other for her nuns, *The Way of Perfection*, in which she laid



out the kind of life and prayer they were to live together, not only for their own sanctification but for the Church whose troubles distressed her as much as the thought of Christ's own sufferings. For Teresa the sufferings of the Church were the sufferings of Christ.

How much there was, then, for John of St. Matthias to learn from this humble, simple, awesome nun. Teresa, for her part, marveled as she got to know the small friar better. "Though he is small in stature, I believe that he is great in God's eyes," she wrote at the time. John was speaking so knowingly and brilliantly about the wonders of God and the mysteries of the divine goodness that the group began to refer to him as "God's archives."

There were also differences between the Madre and her first friar, and she admits to having become vexed with him at times. She had wanted learned men for her new communities of friars so that they might be good guides not only through experience of the same style of life but through their learning. Having suffered much from the vincible ignorance of her confessors, Teresa was keen to spare her daughters anything similar. John, at the time, tended to stress the limitations of learning. Teresa thought an expert was a person with a degree who knew a lot about something; John didn't seem to think anybody knew much about anything — an expert was someone who knew the mistakes that could be made and how to avoid them. Fearing that austerities and penances might frighten university students away from her new friars, Teresa insisted on a balanced life in which the Christian virtues such as charity, detachment, and humility would receive far more favor than austerities. Austerities in those times were closely associated with sanctity, and John, though recognizing Teresa's claims, leaned toward austerities, which reforming friars also liked to think of as the manly path. Later, in his writings, John too was to treat austerities with a certain skepticism, pointing out how, along with so many other good things, they can end up wrecking the spiritual life. Teresa thought that Christian joy ought to permeate her communities; the nuns took time for recreation together each day, and sang and wrote poetry for one another. There was no reason for them to be somber. "Be affable, agreeable, and pleasing to persons with whom you deal," Teresa warmly counseled, "so that all will love your conversation and desire your manner of living and acting." John needed time to get used to this. Recitation of the Divine Office was much simpler in Teresa's communities than it had been at the Incarnation. This allowed an hour in the morning and an hour in the evening for mental prayer. Like the early hermits on Mount Carmel, the nuns lived their day mostly in silence and solitude, alone in their cells, engaging in the manual labor of spinning to help support themselves. But Teresa's friars' daily routine would differ because she wanted them to engage in study and preaching and the ministry of the sacraments.

As in her writings, then, during these days from mid-August to October, Teresa energetically fulfilled her role as teacher, although she confessed she felt that Fray John was so good she could have learned more from him than he from her. On finishing his brief "novitiate" under the Madre's guidance, John of St. Matthias left Valladolid with a new Teresian ardor to start work on converting into a monastery the little farmhouse Teresa acquired for her first friars. It was situated in a lonely spot called Duruelo, midway between Avila and Salamanca. By the end of November Fray John had transformed the small house with its porch, main room, alcove, garret, and tiny kitchen into the first monastery for discalced Carmelite friars. On November 28, 1568, with a young deacon and Fray Antonio de Heredia (who had been prior in Medina), in the presence of the provincial, Fray John of St. Matthias embraced the new life, promising to live without mitigation according to the ancient Carmelite Rule. At that time he changed his name to John of the Cross. The following spring the provincial appointed Fray Antonio prior and Fray John novice master, and in the autumn two novices arrived. The house then became too small, so the community moved to the nearby town of Mancera de Abajo in June 1570. In this year John also traveled to Pastrana to help organize another novitiate, and within a year moved to Alcalá de Henares to set up a house of studies for the new friars near the famous university of Alcalá. He became its first rector, guiding the students in their studies and spiritual development. Right from the beginning, then, John dedicated himself to a task of immediate urgency, spiritual direction. With his Bible, his experience, and his penetrating grasp of both philosophy and theology, he began to ponder spiritual growth, observing the ways of human beings, discerning the ways of God.

His work now had to expand. Teresa, who had recently been sent by the visitor, Pedro Fernández, to take up duties as prioress at the Incarnation in Avila, received permission to enlist the help of Fray John of the Cross as confessor and skilled spiritual director for the large number of nuns there. It was a community weighed down with many economic and social problems. Fernández, a Dominican, was acting as visitor to the Carmelites in Castile by order of Pope Pius V, who entrusted their reform to Dominican friars. Another Dominican, Francisco Vargas,



was responsible for the Carmelites in Andalusia. These visitators had ample powers. They could move religious from house to house and province to province, assist superiors in their offices, and depute other superiors from either the Dominicans or the Carmelites. They were entitled to perform all acts necessary for the "visitation, correction, and reform of both head and members of all houses of friars and nuns." A deep mutual respect and easy working relationship developed between the tactful and diplomatic Fernández and Teresa.

Toward the end of May 1572, John of the Cross arrived in Avila and entered the feminine religious world, a world that was to become his special field of spiritual ministry. This ministry included guiding Teresa herself. From her he received as much as he gave in those years of profound and open conversation, a conversation that once on Trinity Sunday so soared that the two not only went into ecstasy but were seen elevated from the ground. On November 18, 1572, while John was her director, Teresa unexpectedly received the grace of spiritual marriage. She was now in the seventh and final dwelling place of her spiritual journey; there in the center room of the interior castle she came to know the highest state of intimacy with God. The experience of those years, when from so privileged a position the confessor could see God's work in Teresa, left more of a trace in John's later writings than one might first suppose. With the exception of the Bible, Teresa provided a source more enlightening than all of the books Fray John had studied. And she herself did not hold back from extolling the gifts of her director, referring to him in a letter as a "divine and heavenly man" and affirming that she had found no spiritual director like him in all Castile. There they were in Avila, Teresa and John; so much alike, so very different, destined in their writings to complement each other. John's spiritual direction ministry also extended into the city, to a wide range of people, including well-known sinners. He tried to find time for everyone, even the children of the poor. Remembering his own childhood, he gathered these children and taught them to read and write.



Conflicts of Jurisdiction

King Philip II was himself curiously involved in the reform of religious orders and this led to a chain of misunderstandings, to a dark night for the small friar. Fernández had exercised his authority prudently and in harmony with the Carmelite provincial of Castile. In the south, proceeding independently, Francisco Vargas requested the disalced friars to make foundations in Sevilla, Granada, and La Peñuela (all in Andalusia), an action contrary to the prior general's explicit orders against the expansion of the disalced friars into that region. At a chapter of the order convened in Piacenza (Italy) in May 1575, the Carmelite order came to some strong decisions about all that they had heard was taking place in Spain, particularly in Andalusia. Unfortunately the two provincials from Castile and Andalusia, who might have been able to cast some light on the events, were absent. So the ordinances stipulated that those who had been made superiors "against the obedience due superiors within the order itself, or who had accepted offices or lived in monasteries or places prohibited by the same superiors should be removed, with the aid of the secular arm if necessary." Those resisting would be considered disobedient, rebellious, and contumacious, and were to be severely punished. Jerónimo Tostado was appointed the order's visitor to Spain, with full powers to carry out the decrees of the chapter.

In a papal brief in August of the previous year, at the request of the Carmelite order Gregory XIII had declared an end to the Dominican visitation and had ordained that from then on the Carmelites should be visited by the prior general and his delegates, leaving in effect what had been established by the visitors. But the king was not pleased. Why hadn't this matter been presented to him first for his royal placet? In due time the papal nuncio Nicolás Ormaneto, working closely with the king, received assurance that as nuncio he still had powers to visit and reform religious orders. Ormaneto appointed Jerónimo Gracián (a learned priest from the university of Alcalá who had entered the disalced Carmelites and became a close collaborator with Teresa in many of her business affairs) as the new visitor to the Carmelites in Andalusia.

After Teresa's term as prioress at the Incarnation ended, John was ordered by the nuncio to remain at the Incarnation because (it seems) of the excellent work he was doing there. In view of the chapter of Piacenza, John realized that his presence was a cause of tension and sought a change. In fact, he was arrested by the Carmelites of the observance in January 1576, but then released through the nuncio's intervention. Whatever the reason, he remained on, and when Ormaneto, the nuncio, died in June 1577, John was without a defender and his presence in Avila was increasingly resented by those who held that it contradicted the ordinances of Piacenza. It wasn't long before something was done. On the night of December 2, 1577, a group of Carmelites, lay people, and men-at-arms broke into the chaplain's quarters, seized Fray John, and took him away. By a secret journey, with orders from Tostado, they carted him off, handcuffed and often blindfolded, to the monastery in Toledo, the order's finest in Castile, where nearly 85 friars lived. The acts of the chapter in Piacenza were read aloud to John by which he stood accused of being rebellious and contumacious. He would have to submit, or undergo severe punishment. But the accused friar reasoned that the chapter acts did not apply to him because he was at the Incarnation by order of legitimate authority, and he certainly was not obliged to renounce the way of life he had embraced along with Teresa. The punishment he received was imprisonment, according to the constitutions.

His accusers locked him first in the monastery prison, but at the end of two months, for fear of an escape, they moved him to another spot, a room narrow and dark, without air or light except for whatever filtered through a small slit high up in the wall. The room was six feet wide and ten feet long. There John remained alone, without anything but his breviary, through the terribly cold winter months and the suffocating heat of summer. Added to all this were the floggings, fasting on bread and water, wearing the same bedraggled clothes month after month without being washed — and the lice. Teresa wrote to the king and pleaded that for the love of God he order Fray John set free at once. In the midst of this deprivation, Fray John was seeking relief by composing poetry in his mind, leaving to posterity some of the greatest lyric stanzas in Spanish literature — among them a major portion of *The Spiritual Canticle*. These verses suggest that in that cramped prison, stripped of all earthly comfort, he was touched with some rays of divine light. The cramped conditions faded, the friar's awareness expanded. "My beloved, the mountains." Here too, in the dark emptiness, a spiritual synthesis began to flower. "Faith and love will lead you along a path unknown to you, to the place where God is hidden. Everything else gone, no one could divest him of these, and they gave him God."



Taking advantage of a new jailer who was kinder and more lenient, John managed to get paper and ink so as to write down his poems. He also had the opportunity, during a daily reprieve from his cell, to familiarize himself with the monastery surroundings. Then, one hot night in August, after being held prisoner for nine months, emaciated and close to death, John chose life and undertook a dangerous escape he had plotted during the short periods out of his cell. He had discovered a window that looked down on the Tajo river, and underneath the window was the top of a wall. But, of course, there was a lock on his prison door. He solved that problem by loosening the screws of the lock while his jailer was absent. When the friars seemed to be asleep and the house all still, he pushed hard on the door of his prison and the lock came loose. This enabled him to leave his prison and find his way in the dark to the window. By means of a kind of rope made out of strips torn from two old bed covers and attached to a lamp hook, he escaped through the window onto the top of the wall. The wall encircled the monastery and its garden, so he walked around the top of it until he came to what he thought was the street side. There he jumped from the wall, only to find himself in another bad predicament. He had landed inside the courtyard of the Franciscan nuns of the Conception monastery that was adjacent to that of the Carmelites. Fortunately, in one corner of the nuns' garden he found that the stones in the wall could be used as steps, allowing him to climb over the wall to the city street and to his freedom. Some claimed his escape was miraculous. At any rate he was able to find refuge first with Teresa's nuns in Toledo and then, through their intervention, at the nearby hospital of Santa Cruz, where he was cared for secretly. The new nuncio, Felipe Segá, not at all like his predecessor, showed displeasure with Teresa, and especially her friars, who already numbered more than 300 members. With Tostado's help he explored ways to bring about some kind of order. In October 1578, nearly desperate, the discalced friars convened a chapter in Almodóvar del Campo, southwest of Toledo, despite doubts about its legality. They merely wanted, they claimed, to execute what they had agreed on in a previous chapter called by Gracián in 1576, while Ormaneto was still alive. The fugitive Fray John of the Cross was appointed vicar of El Calvario, a monastery situated in a mountainous solitude near Beas in Andalusia. Here he would be safer against any attempts to recapture him.

When Segá learned of the chapter at Almodóvar he declared it null and void, angrily sent Gracián and others to prison, and placed the discalced friars and nuns under the authority of the provincial of the observant Carmelites. But the king had already set up a maneuver to dampen Segá's ardor: a commission to study the accusations against the discalced. In April 1579 the commission reached its decision, appointing Angel de Salazar, a former provincial of the observant Carmelites, in charge of Teresa's friars and nuns. Teresa rejoiced in the appointment, and Gracián praised Salazar as a gentle and discreet man whose main concern was to console the afflicted and promote peace.



Poet and Spiritual Father

John must have felt consolation and peace when a year and a few months previous to this he arrived to take up his office at El Calvario, a place of spectacular beauty far away from the jurisdictional conflicts and threats. He never cared to go over the past and talk about his imprisonment. He bore no animosity; he neither complained nor boasted about what he had endured. Now more than ever he could listen to nature through his senses; the flowers, the whistling breezes, the night, the dawn, the rushing streams, all spoke to him. God was present everywhere.

But in less than a year he had to move to the city again, this time to the university town of Baeza to serve as rector of the new college for the Teresian friars in the south. Unable to compete with places like Salamanca or Alcalá, the university of Baeza did enjoy a certain prestige and was making important contributions to Scripture studies. While rector of the Carmelite college (1579-82), John guided his own students in their studies, becoming acquainted as well with the professors at the university. Records reveal that they frequently consulted and had long conversations with him about the Bible. In these years after his escape, John took up once more the ministry of spiritual direction, not only of the friars but also of the nuns. He made frequent journeys through the mountains to Beas, a typical little Andalusian town with small whitewashed houses, grilles in front of large windows, and balconies full of flowering plants. The town is important in John's life, for here he met Ana de Jesús, the prioress, who did not at first recognize his depth and spirituality. In a letter to Ana, responding to her complaint about having no spiritual director, Teresa made clear her thoughts about Fray John of the Cross:

I'm really surprised, daughter, at your complaining so unreasonably, when you have Father Fray John of the Cross with you, who is a divine, heavenly man. I can tell you, daughter, that since he went away I have found no one like him in all Castile, nor anyone who inspires people with so much fervor on the way to heaven. You would not believe how lonely his absence makes me feel. You should reflect that you have a great treasure in that holy man, and all those in the monastery should see him and open their souls to him, when they will see what great good they get and will find themselves to have made great progress in spirituality and perfection, for our Lord has given him a special grace for this [December 1578].

She went on to extol his holiness, kindness, experience, and learning. Soon Ana de Jesús and her nuns affirmed Teresa's words through their own experience. John shared his poems with them, and began the work of commentary through his talks to them on his *Spiritual Canticle*. While the saintly friar served as rector at Baeza, his discalced brethren, through the intervention of the king, obtained juridical independence. In 1580 the Holy See allowed them to erect an autonomous province, but under the higher jurisdiction of the general of the order. Complete independence did not come until 1593, after the deaths of both Teresa and John, when Pope Clement VIII accorded the discalced Carmelites the same rights and privileges as other religious orders. In 1582, Fray John was elected prior of a monastery adjacent to the site of the Alhambra, with an outstanding view of the Sierra Nevada and overlooking the enchanting city of Granada with its exotic traces of Moorish culture in evidence everywhere. Here, in addition to leading the community, John designed and worked on a new aqueduct and a new monastery building that became a model for the discalced. At the same time, his ministry of spiritual direction — not only to the friars and nuns but also to the clergy and lay people who came knocking at the monastery door seeking help — set in motion his work as a writer, and he began to compose his classic works of spirituality. In 1585, at a chapter in Lisbon, John was elected vicar provincial of Andalusia. This office obliged him to travel frequently. He had to attend all the houses of friars and nuns in Andalusia, visiting each formally at least once a year. He founded seven new monasteries. All this brought him to Córdoba, Málaga, Caravaca, Jaén, and other renowned cities in the south of Spain.



Final Years

In the summer of 1588, John was elected third councillor to the vicar general for the disalced, Father Nicolás Doria, and had to return to Segovia in Castile, where in this capacity he was also prior. At his new site, one with a splendid view of Segovia and the surrounding area, he spent a good portion of his time again in manual labor, designing an addition to the monastery, quarrying stone for it, and working on its construction. He no longer wrote, but spent more time in prayer, going off to a cave on the property where he could view the countryside and have solitude for his deep contemplation. He had brought his latest work, *The Living Flame of Love*, to an unexpectedly swift close, confessing that he did not want to explain any further about the breathing of the Holy Spirit in the soul, "for I am aware of being incapable of so doing, and were I to try, it might seem less than it is." Never one to shun those who came for help, John continued his ministry of spiritual direction; the business matters of the order's government were always claiming attention as well. In fact, these latter sparked another conflict, this time among the disalced themselves. The clash began when Nicolás Doria called an extraordinary chapter in June 1590 for the purpose of undertaking two controversial moves. First he wanted to abandon jurisdiction over the nuns, a reprisal against Madre Ana de Jesús who opposed his plans; Doria had hoped both to make changes in Teresa's constitutions and to govern the nuns through a body of councillors rather than through one friar appointed to the task. Second, he proposed the expulsion of Teresa's close collaborator, Father Jerónimo Gracián, from the disalced Carmelites. Fray John spoke in opposition to both moves. In the chapter the following year, different councillors were elected to assist Doria, and John remained without an office, a fact that was more a problem for others than for himself. When the news got about, some began raising strong protests. But John looked at things differently, as he so often did, and expressed his mind in a letter to the prioress in Segovia:

Do not let what is happening to me, daughter, cause you any grief, for it does not cause me any. What greatly grieves me is that one who is not at fault is blamed. Men do not do these things, but God, who knows what is suitable for us and arranges things for our own good. Think nothing else but that God ordains all, and where there is no love, put love, and you will draw out love [July 6, 1591].

Doria, in what seemed a rebuff, sent John of the Cross back into Andalusia, to an isolated monastery called La Peñuela, a solitude like Duruelo or El Calvario. However, John was to stay there only in preparation for a mission to Mexico where he was to lead a group of 12 friars. He was happy in the solitude, but some ugly maneuverings began to disturb the peace of his friends, whom he had helped as spiritual director, and shattered the impressive silence of La Peñuela. Fray Diego Evangelista, with bitter resentment against his former superior, was going about threatening and intimidating, trying to gather information against the spiritual friar so as to have him expelled from the disalced. Fray Diego never had time to proceed far with his designs. In mid-September John began to suffer a slight fever caused by an inflammation of the leg. Thinking it nothing serious, he paid little attention, but when it persisted he was forced to make the journey to Ubeda for the medical assistance that was unavailable at La Peñuela. Given the choice between Baeza and Ubeda, he chose Ubeda, "for at Baeza they know me very well, and in Ubeda nobody knows me." It was the last journey of his life.

The prior of the monastery at Ubeda, Fray Francisco Crisóstomo, did not welcome the sick man. Learned and famous as a preacher, Fray Crisóstomo had his weaknesses, among them a tendency to be mean and rigid. A sick friar was a nuisance and an expense as far as he was concerned, and he showed his vexation; nor did he care for people who were supposedly holy. John's sickness grew worse. His leg was already ulcerated, and the disease, erysipelas [a bacterial skin infection], spread to his back where a new fist-sized tumor formed. On December 13, Fray John of the Cross, knowing that time was running short, called for the prior and begged pardon for all the trouble he had caused. This profoundly changed the prior, who himself then begged forgiveness and left the cell in tears, totally transformed. According to witnesses Fray Francisco Crisóstomo later died in the odor of sanctity. That same night, when the friars began to recite the prayers for the dying, Fray John of the Cross begged, "No, read some verses from the Song of Songs," and then exclaimed, "Oh, what precious pearls!" At midnight, without agony, without struggle, he died, repeating the words of the psalmist: "Into your hands, O Lord, I commend my spirit." The favors he had asked for in his last years he had now received: not to die as a superior, to die in a place where he was unknown, and to die after having suffered much.



A Portrait of the Saint

These main events in the short life of St. John of the Cross do not leave us with the full picture of his character and personal spirituality. His early first-hand acquaintance with deprivation, the later misunderstandings and imprisonment, the final persecution that he suffered, all might more easily have brought forth a bitter cynic; instead, the result was a man purified and enlightened. Events outwardly sad but inwardly transforming bore fruits in charity toward others and deep compassion for the sufferer. Together with these came a rare, clear vision of the beauty of God's creation and an intimacy with the Blessed Trinity that John found somewhat describable only through comparisons to the life of glory. But first, regarding the physical appearance of Fray John of the Cross, he was a small man, measuring four feet, eleven inches. Whenever St. Teresa referred to him she seemed almost obliged to use the diminutive. In describing his imprisonment, she writes: "For the whole nine months he was in a small prison where, little as he is, there was not enough room for him to move." He was also thin, but his lean, oval face and his broad forehead, receding into baldness, gave him a venerable appearance. His nose was slightly aquiline, his eyes dark and large. Rounding off this figure of Fray John was his old, rough, brown habit and a white cloak so coarse it seemed made of goat hair.

Marked by the poverty he suffered as a child and even as a friar, he found it hard to ignore others in the distress of material need. With his penitents he did not limit himself to seeking their spiritual good, but he looked for ways to help them when they were in want. Sometimes he gave them alms from the meager funds of the monastery, or sometimes he begged alms for them from other devout people. Noticing once that a priest who came to him for confession was wearing a worn-out cassock, he asked some benefactors for money to buy the priest a new one. He grieved over the poverty of many of the nuns at the Incarnation who didn't have the material resources enjoyed by those from well-to-do families. One day, entering the convent for his ministry, he saw a nun sweeping the floor barefooted, and doing so not out of penance but because she had no shoes. Immediately he trudged up to the city and asked some charitable persons for money, which he in turn gave to the nun so she could buy shoes for herself. Then there was the year 1584, a year of barrenness and hunger in Andalusia. As prior in Granada John did everything he could to help with either food or money all the needy who came to the monastery gate. Those of higher lineage he helped secretly because, even though in want, they were ashamed to beg openly. Finding the poor wherever he journeyed, he also found the sick. He began to understand intimately the affliction of the latter during his hospital work as a youth in Medina. Taking pains to show the most delicate sympathy for the sick, he knew how to care for them, comfort them, and give them hope. He would not allow the question of money to interfere with his desire to give his sick friars the best possible care. He once asked a doctor if there were any remedy for a lay brother who was undergoing extraordinary suffering. The doctor answered that the only medicine he knew was very expensive and would do no more than relieve the suffering somewhat. Despite the penury of the community John sent for the medicine and administered it to the sick brother himself, and did so happily. On arriving at a monastery he always made it a point first to greet the sick after his visit to the Blessed Sacrament.

Quick to perceive sadness or depression in another and eager to comfort the downcast, he could appreciate humor. Surprisingly, witnesses have told of his gift for humor and the enjoyment he got from making others laugh. They looked forward to having him present. As prior he accepted the responsibility of having to call others to account, but he was intent on not discouraging anyone. His opinion was that people "become pusillanimous [timid] in undertaking works of great virtue when they are treated harshly by superiors." Nor did he think he had the answers to all problems. His practice was to consult others in the community, a method of government that helped to create an atmosphere of serenity. Being a saint does not free one from the capacity for making mistakes, nor does being a superior, and John once remarked of himself at the end of his life: "When I recall the foolish mistakes I made as superior, I blush."

Human needs are not only material and psychological; there are distinctive spiritual needs as well. In his oral teaching John used to point out that the more you love God the more you desire that all people love and honor him and as the desire grows you work harder toward that end, both in prayer and in all other possible works. His preferred work was spiritual direction, whereby he could help to free individuals from their moral and spiritual illnesses. In this endeavor he did not spare himself, so special was his awareness of our exalted destiny. From



university professor to humble, unlettered shepherds' wives, people of all classes felt the allure of his confessional. The ease the humble lay sister, Catalina de la Cruz, experienced in his presence is evident in the kind of question she once asked him: "Why when I go to the garden do the frogs jump in the water?" Quickly seizing an opportunity to draw out a spiritual lesson, John replied that it was because they felt safe in the depth of the pool and "that is what you must do, flee from creatures and hide yourself in God." Sinners also found their way to him without fear. "The holier a confessor," he used to say, "the less fear one should have of him." In his spiritual direction of others John focused on communion with God in faith, hope, and love, called by some the "theological life." This life is both active and passive and encompasses everything, from the first steps in Christian living to the highest reaches of the mystical journey. In an age that found severe austerities a fascinating and necessary part of spiritual pursuit, his ascetical teaching pointed to faith, hope, and love as the way to sanctity in the following of Christ.

But his deepest concern was for those who were suffering in their spiritual life. The needs of souls struggling with inner trials stirred him to write *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* and *The Dark Night*. If his intense portrayal of the afflictions of the dark night can prove frightening to some, his desire in so presenting them was to include everyone by describing these sufferings in their extreme form. He wanted everyone to find comfort in the thought that however severe it may be, purification is still the work of God's gentle hand, clearing away the debris of attachment and making room for the divine light. Pain for him was not a misfortune but a value when suffered with and for Christ. Nothing about John's life indicates that he thought he should have a specialist's priorities in the use of his time. He participated in all the different tasks necessary to keep a community running. We find him in the choir, the confessional, the kitchen, weeding the garden, decorating the altars, making architectural plans, joining in construction work, visiting the sick and, of course, writing. Hard physical labor, small and delicate though he was, seemed to attract him. Was it his way of protesting the thought of the Illuminists who held that the servants of God should not undertake manual labor? At both Granada and Segovia, when these monasteries were being built, he joined the workmen in quarrying stone for the construction. At Beas, when free from counseling the nuns he would do chores for them, setting up partitions, laying bricks, and scrubbing floors.

He observed how creatures can enslave and darken and torment. But the deceptive delights of those who are attached to creatures cannot compare with the joy of people who are detached from them. Beholding in creation a trace of the divine beauty, power, and loving wisdom, John could not easily resist the enchantment of nature. Because he missed the lyric country solitude of El Calvario after founding the student college in Baeza, he acquired some property in the country, making it possible for him and the young Carmelites to escape from the bustling city. He would take the friars out to the mountains, sometimes for the sake of relaxation, "to prevent their wanting to leave the monastery from spending too much time in it," as he once remarked; sometimes, so that each might pass the day alone there "in solitary prayer." At Segovia he had his favorite grotto, hollowed out by nature, high up on the back bluff overlooking a marvelous stretch of sky, river, and landscape. He grew to love this silent grotto and spent all the time he could spare there. John's letters exhibit the warmth with which he usually communed with others. But his brother Francisco seems to have given him special happiness. He used to introduce Francisco by saying, "May I introduce you to my brother, who is the treasure I value most in the world." St. Teresa, also, it should go without saying, awakened in him particular admiration, so much so that he carried her portrait about with him. Accompanying the outward, evangelical simplicity of his manner was a soul on fire, like Teresa's. Of his intimacy with God he once admitted in Granada: "God communicates the mystery of the Trinity to this sinner in such a way that if His Majesty did not strengthen my weakness by a special help, it would be impossible for me to live." Overwhelmed with awareness of God's goodness, he was frequently heard to exclaim, "Oh, what a good God we have!" Requiring little sleep, he spent much of the night in prayer, sometimes kneeling at the altar steps before the Blessed Sacrament; at other times he knelt beneath the trees in the garden, and sometimes at the window of his cell, from which he could look out at the heavens and all the countryside. In the latter years of his brief life, his absorption in God could become so profound that he experienced difficulty in attending to ordinary affairs, secretly having to hit his knuckles against the wall so as not to lose the trend of conversation.

His experience of God was always rooted in the life of the Church, nourished by the sacraments and the liturgy. Witnesses of his life spoke of the devotion with which he celebrated Mass. A center of his contemplation, Mass often proved to be an occasion for special graces. During the celebration he could become so lost in God that he



had no consciousness of his surroundings. His greatest suffering during the imprisonment in Toledo was being deprived of the Eucharist. The Blessed Sacrament was "all his glory, all his happiness, and for him far surpassed all the things of the earth." The one privilege he accepted when major superior in Segovia was the cell closest to the Blessed Sacrament.

The liturgical feasts and seasons meant more than an external commemoration; they were the occasion of an interior transformation in the spirit of the mystery being celebrated. On the day before Christmas he used to organize with the friars a kind of paraliturgical procession to recall how Mary and Joseph went in search of lodging for the divine Infant. At Christmas time above all he felt his heart pulsate with love for the Child Jesus. One Christmas, seeing a statue of the Infant lying on a cushion, he cried out, "Lord, if love is to slay me, the hour has now come." Another Christmas, taken with love, he took the statue of the Infant in his arms and began to dance with enraptured joy. His countenance, in fact, corresponded with the Church's liturgy. Once during Holy Week he suffered so intensely from the Passion of Christ that he found it impossible to leave the monastery to hear the nuns' confessions. Among his favorite feasts, besides those of the Blessed Trinity and Corpus Christi, were the feasts of the Blessed Virgin. In his prison cell, on the Vigil of the Assumption, after nine months of severe privation, he was asked what he was thinking of. He replied, "I was thinking that tomorrow is the feast of our Lady and that it would give me great joy to say Mass." The sight of an image of the Mother of God brought love and brightness to his soul. Once, on seeing an image of our Lady while he was preaching to the nuns in Caravaca, he could not conceal his love for her and exclaimed: "How happy I would be to live alone in a desert with that image." The Bible, the book he cherished most of all, helped him to enter into intimacy with the three Persons of the Trinity. He loved to withdraw to hidden parts of the monastery with his Bible. While he was in Lisbon, the other friars urged him to come with them to visit a famed stigmatic of that city, but he refused; drawn by the ocean, he remained on the shore reading his Bible while the others went off to observe the curious phenomenon. From his Bible and his nearness to God, John knew that loving confidence in Providence was the appropriate response to life's worries and anxieties. He observed that when God, like a loving mother, wants to carry us, we kick and cry and insist on walking by ourselves, and get nowhere. Some thought that since he was prior of a poor monastery he should show more concern about material needs. They would have liked him to worry. But his habit of seeing the hand of God in all things contributed, in fact, to an air of peace and calm. This was his way, too, in persecution. He saw the hand of God there and urged others not to speak uncharitably of his persecutors, but to think "only that God ordains all." He wrote that trust in God should be so great that even if the whole world were to collapse one should not become disturbed. Enduring things with equanimity reaps many blessings, he said, and helps a person in the middle of adversity to make an appropriate judgment and find the right option. This total trust in God gave him peace in his final illness. Being reminded of all he had suffered, he replied with these remarkable words: "Padre, this is not the time to be thinking of that; it is by the merits of the blood of our Lord Jesus Christ that I hope to be saved."



Biographical Chronology

- † 1529 Marriage in Fontiveros of Gonzalo de Yepes and Catalina Alvarez, John's parents.
- † 1530 Francisco, the first son, is born.
- † 1532-40 Luis, the second son, is born; year uncertain.
- † 1542 John (Juan de Yepes) is born; month and day uncertain.
- † 1545 Don Gonzalo dies.
- † 1545-46 Doña Catalina travels to Toledo with her three children in search of help from her husband's family. A brother-in-law takes Francisco, who suffers a year of abusive treatment by his aunt. Doña Catalina returns, rejected, to Fontiveros with her other boys.
- † 1547 Luis dies.
- † 1548-51 The family moves to Arévalo. Here Francisco marries Ana Izquierdo.
- † 1551 The family moves to Medina del Campo.
- † 1551-58 John attends the Catechism school. Tries apprenticeships at various trades. Serves as acolyte at La Magdalena.
- † 1556 St. Ignatius Loyola dies. Charles V (d. 1559) abdicates. Philip II becomes king.
- † 1559-63 John studies humanities and perhaps philosophy with the Jesuits. He also works at humble tasks for the hospital in Medina.
- † 1562 St. Teresa establishes the reform at St. Joseph's in Avila.
- † 1563 The Council of Trent closes. John enters the novitiate of the Carmelites at Santa Ana in Medina and makes profession the following year.
- † 1564-68 He attends the University of Salamanca: three years in the arts program and one year in theology.
- † 1567 Early months: the Carmelite General, Juan Bautista Rossi (Rubeo), visits Castile, authorizes Teresa to found discalced Carmelite monasteries of friars and nuns outside Avila.
- † 1567 April: John is named prefect of students by the provincial chapter held in Avila. July: ordained a priest in Salamanca. August: sings his first Mass in Medina. September-October: First meeting with St. Teresa, who wins John over to her cause.
- † 1568 John finishes his theological course at Salamanca and agrees to take part in the first house of discalced Carmelite friars. August: he journeys with Teresa to Valladolid and remains there several months to learn the Teresian way of life. October: moves to Duruelo to adapt the house to a monastery. November 28: inauguration of the discalced friars' first house in Duruelo; John is appointed subprior and novice-master.
- † 1569 Lent: St. Teresa visits Duruelo.
- † 1570 June: Duruelo turns out to be unhealthy. The community moves to Mancera de Abajo. At the end of the year John visits Pastrana to bring unity in the criteria for formation.
- † 1571 January: he accompanies Teresa to Alba de Tormes for her foundation of nuns there. He becomes rector of the university college of Alcalá de Henares. A new visit to Pastrana.



- † 1572 May: in Avila, at Teresa's request, Fray John of the Cross becomes the vicar and confessor at the monastery of the Incarnation. He remains there with brief interruptions until 1577.
- † 1574 March: he accompanies Teresa on the foundation in Segovia and returns at the end of April.
- † 1575 Goes to Medina to discern the spirit of a discalced nun. May: the general chapter of the order at Piacenza (Italy) decrees reabsorption of the discalced Carmelites into the order.
- † 1576 January: the first arrest of Fray John and his companion by the Carmelites of the Observance. The two are released through the intervention of the nuncio. September 9: the discalced Carmelites meet in Almodóvar del Campo. Fray John attends. Gracián presides. Christmas: John participates in the "Satirical Critique" proposed and judged by Teresa, on the theme "Seek yourself in Me."
- † 1577 June 2: St. Teresa begins to write *The Interior Castle* in Toledo. The nuncio Ormaneto dies. His successor does not favor the discalced Carmelites. December 2: John is abducted in Avila; between the 4th and the 8th he is brought to Toledo, where he remains for nine months in the monastery prison.
- † 1578 August: during the octave after the Assumption, between 2 and 3 a.m., he escapes from prison. He takes with him a notebook containing various poems and remains hidden for a time in Toledo. October: on his way to Andalusia he attends the secret chapter of discalced Carmelites at Almodóvar. Elected vicar of El Calvario (Sierra del Segura, Jaén). November: John arrives at El Calvario and takes up his office.
- † 1579 Fruitful activity among the nuns at Beas. "The Sketch of the Mount," many of the "Sayings of Light and Love," some undeveloped commentary on stanzas from *The Spiritual Canticle* and *The Dark Night*. April-May: he makes frequent trips to Baeza to plan the foundation of a new college there. June: John founds the university college in Baeza and becomes the rector.
- † 1580 John's mother, Doña Catalina, dies in Medina. John visits Caravaca at Teresa's request. June 22: a brief from Gregory XIII decrees a separation between the calced and discalced Carmelites. John is given a gift of property at Castellar de Santisteban as a place for relaxation and prayer.
- † 1581 March: attends the chapter at Alcalá where the brief of separation is implemented. Padre Gracián is named provincial; John, third definitor. June: John travels to Caravaca. November: John travels to Avila with the intention of bringing St. Teresa to Granada to make a foundation of nuns there. On returning without Teresa, he passes through Beas to take Ana de Jesús with him as foundress in Granada.
- † 1582 January: continues on the journey to Granada. They arrive on the 20th. Doña Ana de Peñalosa enters into the plans for the foundation. John becomes prior of Los Mártires in Granada, where he writes most of his commentaries and various poems. April 8: five discalced Carmelite friars destined for the missions in the Congo set sail from Lisbon. October 4: St. Teresa dies in Alba de Tormes.
- † 1583 May: John attends a chapter in Almodóvar. He is confirmed in his office as prior in Granada.
- † 1585 February: John travels to Málaga for the nuns' foundation. May: attends the provincial chapter in Lisbon. He is elected second definitor. June-July: he returns from Lisbon by way of Sevilla, and then goes to Málaga. July-August: further travels to various communities. October: in Pastrana for the continuation of the chapter that began in Lisbon. The new provincial, Padre Doria, had to return first from Italy. John is appointed vicar provincial of Andalusia, with his residence in Granada.
- † 1586 February: he travels to Caravaca. May: in Córdoba for a new foundation there. June: in Sevilla for the move of the discalced Carmelite nuns. He draws up papers for the foundation of friars at the Marian shrine in Guadalcázar. He journeys to Ecija, Guadalcázar, and Córdoba. July: he goes to Málaga. August-September: attends a meeting of definitors in Madrid. He brings Ana de Jesús with him for a foundation of nuns in Madrid. The definitory decrees the publication of Teresa's works and substitution of the Roman liturgy for that of the Holy Sepulcher, which the Carmelites had been using. October: makes a foundation of friars in Manchuela (Jaén). November: travels once more to Málaga. December: travels to Caravaca where he makes a foundation of friars. Travels to Bujalance to make plans for a foundation.



- † 1587 January: plans for the foundation in Bujalance fail. February: a quick trip to Madrid at the request of the provincial, Nicolás Doria. March: travels to Caravaca to intervene in a litigation between the nuns and the Jesuits. He then moves on to Baeza. On the 8th, he is at the Marian shrine of Fuensanta (Jaén), which was entrusted to the discalced Carmelites. April: travels to Valladolid to take part in the provincial chapter. His duties as vicar provincial cease. He is elected prior of Granada once more.
- † 1588 June: Doria convokes an extraordinary chapter in Madrid. John (a definator on a committee for procedure) is elected first councillor (among six) in the new form of government called the consulta. He will reside in Segovia. During the absence of the vicar general (Doria), John will act as the major definator and president of the consulta. He is also prior of the house. Some discalced Carmelites embark with the "Invincible Armada."
- † 1589-90 As prior in Segovia, he makes important improvements on the property and undertakes building the new monastery. Doña Ana de Peñalosa is the benefactress.
- † 1590 June: an extraordinary chapter is held in Madrid. Serious disagreements surface. John does not support Doria's plans for dealing with Gracián or with some nuns who were disenchanted with the idea of the consulta.
- † 1591 June 1: on the eve of Pentecost, the chapter begins in Madrid. Doria is reelected. John has no office, is willing to go to Mexico. July-August: he moves to the solitude of La Peñuela in Andalusia. September: suffers from fevers and gangrenous sores on his foot. He transfers to Ubeda for medical care. November 27: the vicar provincial, Fr. Antonio de Jesús, arrives in Ubeda. December 7-8: John's condition worsens. December 11: he requests Viaticum. December 13: he bids farewell and begs the prior's pardon for any disturbances he may have caused and an old habit for his burial. He receives the Last Rites and alludes frequently to the hour of his death. When the clock strikes midnight (December 14) and the monastery bell rings for Matins, he goes, as he had foretold, "to sing Matins in heaven."
- † 1593 May: his remains are transferred to Segovia. Perhaps alluded to by Cervantes (*Don Quixote*, 1. 19).
- † 1618 The first edition of John of the Cross's works (Alcalá), without *The Spiritual Canticle*.
- † 1622 The first French edition of *The Spiritual Canticle* (Paris).
- † 1627 The first Spanish edition of *The Spiritual Canticle* (Brussels).
- † 1630 The first edition of the complete works in Spanish, prepared by Jerónimo de San José (Madrid).
- † 1675 January 22: Clement X beatifies John of the Cross.
- † 1726 December 27: Benedict XIII canonizes him.
- † 1874 The Royal Academy of the Spanish Language includes John of the Cross in its official catalogue of writers who can serve as authorities in the use of words and phrases in the Castilian tongue.
- † 1926 August 24: Pius XI declares St. John of the Cross a Doctor of the universal Church. His body is moved to the present tomb in Segovia designed by Félix Granda.
- † 1952 The Spanish Ministry of National Education names John of the Cross the patron of Spanish poets.



The Writings

The works of St. John of the Cross do not compare in quantity and thematic variety with the writings of other great Doctors of the Church. As a poet, first of all, John presented the rich content of his mystical experience in lyric poetry, and by this has contributed a sublime treasure to Spanish literature. In addition, he has left us four major prose works: *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*; *The Dark Night*; *The Spiritual Canticle*; and *The Living Flame of Love*. The only other writings left are relatively few letters and various maxims and counsels. Written during the last 14 years of his life, after his intellectual and spiritual growth had come to full flower, his extant works show a doctrinal synthesis of the spiritual life that was substantially complete in his mind once he began to write. No essential change of thought occurs in his teaching; there is no "earlier John" to contrast with the "later John." The themes he dwells on also remain constant: union with God, its trinitarian origins and final outcome in glory; Jesus Christ, Word and Beloved; faith, as both the content of the mystery and the obscure way to union; love, the going out from self to live in the other; the active and passive development of the theological life; the communication of God in silent prayer; the appetites, a dynamic of sin and destruction.

In the field of Spanish literature, John of the Cross has won a prominent place for his poetry. As for his prose style, he writes in different modes. Sometimes he explains through common symbols, at other times in biblical language, or again through the conceptual terms of the scholastic theologian; sometimes the style is very much his own creation. But it is not apparent that he took pains to polish his prose. His sentences can get complicated, repetitious, and cluttered. Not infrequently, however, the inspiration of his poetry overflows into his prose, offering passages of literary power, originality, and beauty.

With the exception of *The Sayings of Light and Love* and some letters whose autographs have been conserved, John of the Cross's original manuscripts have been lost. His writings come to us in numerous codices that hand on more or less faithful copies. Thus we have a critical problem concerning the original reading and the selection of the codex that seems most faithful to the original. The particular introductions to each work will point out the codex considered most trustworthy by specialists; this copy will then be followed in the translation.

Here is an overview of the authentic works and their actual or approximate places and dates of composition:

- † TOLEDO PRISON (1578)
- † *The Spiritual Canticle* (poem, 31 stanzas)
- † *For I Know Well the Spring* (poem)
- † The *Romances*: On the Gospel text "In principio erat Verbum" (poem)
- † On the psalm "Super flumina Babylonis" (poem)
- † CALVARIO, BEAS, BAEZA (1578-81)
- † *The Dark Night* (poem, 1578 or 1579)
- † *The Sketch of the Mount*
- † *The Sayings of Light and Love*
- † *The Precautions*
- † Counsels to a Religious
- † *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* (treatise, 1581-85)



- † Additions to *The Spiritual Canticle* (poem); other poems (1580-84)
- † GRANADA (1582-88)
- † *The Spiritual Canticle* (commentary in a first redaction, 1584)
- † *The Dark Night* (commentary, 1584-85)
- † Last poems in Granada (1585)
- † *The Living Flame of Love* (commentary in a first redaction, 1585-86)
- † *The Spiritual Canticle* (commentary in a second redaction, 1585-86)
- † LA PEÑUELA (1591)
- † *The Living Flame of Love* (commentary in a second redaction)



Sources

In his writings, John seized the opportunity to communicate with his readers as a mystic, poet, teacher, and ardent lover of God. For the sake of instructing, he draws on his knowledge of theology, psychology, and spiritual direction. Beginning with the symbols of his poetry, he then leads the reader to his conceptual system with its own language and applications. As for sources, in John's time the past provided not merely source material but authority. The Church acknowledged certain writers as authoritative. Scripture, above all, settled matters. A biblical passage was considered an authority from Scripture, and was often referred to as such by John. The modern concern with accurate texts and critical scholarship was not then in force; it seems John often quoted from memory or from medieval compilations. Some of the nonscriptural works he quotes are now known as spurious. The point is that instead of historical scholarship, textual accuracy, and a cautious mind with regard to the received wisdom, John's world set high store by a tradition handed down through the centuries and mediated through sometimes corrupt texts.

In both structure and outline of thought, John's writings display the influences of Aquinas and the scholastics. Certain elements of the mysticism reflect Augustine and Neoplatonism. Some images and stages suggest both the German and Rhineland mystics and the themes, problems, and language of the earlier Spanish mystics. A susceptibility to sensual impressions and symbols characteristic of Spanish poetry in this period is obvious; there may also be symbolic and linguistic influences from Islam. But however much we speculate on all this, the only book that can be properly called a fount of John's experience and writings is the Bible.

For John, the Bible served as a living and unfailing wellspring. Its waters pervade the entire being of this mystical thinker, poet, and writer. The Bible was his hymnal, his meditation book, a book for travel, for contemplation, and for writing. Scriptural quotations throughout his works show how deeply he had assimilated the Divine Word, but he never keeps to a single exegetical style; and the reader might find this disconcerting.

Three principal ways to benefit from the biblical text attracted John. First, the Bible offered him an excellent expression of his own spiritual experience. Second, he found in the Bible a confirmation of his theological argument. Finally, he enjoyed and followed the contemporary practice of using scriptural passages in an accommodated sense. John discovered a close alliance between biblical history and his own personal history, an identification of ancient experiences with actual ones. Reading the Bible as a Christian, in a Christocentric light, he recognized his own life reflected and described there. He noted that here and now the grace and truth of the biblical word was being accomplished. The disorder of the appetites could be compared with the idolatrous love of ancient Israel. Job, the psalmist, and Jeremiah suffered and put to song the dark night of the spirit. The quest for union repeated the steps of the *Song of Songs*.

In special ways, he identified with persons of the Bible: with Moses, David, Job, the psalmist, Jeremiah, Paul, and John. He was drawn to the personal, concrete experiences presented there, inclining toward individuals whose vocation and attitudes were well defined and who had expressed their experiences in the first person. Not content with merely quoting the doctrines and deeds of these people, he turned his attention to their experiences in relation to God. He recounted and sang of his own joys, sufferings, and experiences of God's mercies and favors by disguising them in the words of the prophet, the psalmist, or St. Paul. All the while, the living and collective consciousness of the whole Church is present. In John's teaching, God will not bring clarification and confirmation of the truth to the heart of one who is alone. Such a one would remain weak and cold in regard to the truth. As he went out from himself and passed through the spiritual night, John entered more and more into the substance of the Church, into God's self-manifestation in time. He found no difficulty in relying on the judgment of the Church in matters relating to the expression of his experience and teaching. Church life, doctrine, and prayer supplied the context in which he read and used Scripture.

John also recognized that we cannot understand the truth of Christ without the Holy Spirit. He does not say that the Holy Spirit "spoke" to us, but that he "speaks" to us in the Scriptures, leading us to the complete truth. If we can never fully understand the secret truths and diverse meanings of God's words, these words will, nevertheless, in a certain manner grow with those who read them in the Spirit. That John was a mystic in no way prejudiced his



work as a spiritual director or theologian. A central purpose of his was to transmit the content of his mystical experience. Such experience favored theological reflection because the mystic enjoys a particularly enlightened perception of the mysteries of God, of divine action, and of the life of grace in individuals. From a pastoral viewpoint as well, the mystic knows the goal, and is in a better position to delineate the way and evaluate the means.

Enlightened by his own experience and the experience of others, sometimes — notably in the case of the great St. Teresa herself — as rich and deep as his own, he entered as theologian the most difficult and unexplored regions. He sought to take the revealed mysteries that had been analyzed by theologians and create a doctrinal synthesis that would bring unity and cohesion to all the converging realities of the process of divinization. But in his work as a theologian John also, in veiled ways, sought to transmit something of his own intimate experience of God's mystery so as to awaken a similar experience in his readers. He presented the mystery so others might come close and be totally transformed by it: "One speaks badly of the intimate depths of the spirit if one does not do so with a deeply recollected soul."



Note On The Drawing Of Christ On The Cross

One day during the years when Fray John of the Cross was chaplain at the monastery of the Incarnation in Avila, probably between 1574 and 1577, he was praying in a loft overlooking the sanctuary. Suddenly he received a vision. Taking a pen he sketched on a small piece of paper what he had beheld.

The sketch is of Christ crucified, hanging in space, turned toward his people, and seen from a new perspective. The cross is erect. The body, lifeless and contorted, with the head bent over, hangs forward so that the arms are held only by the nails. Christ is seen from above, from the view of the Father. He is more worm than man, weighed down by the sins of human beings, leaning toward the world for which he died. John, who was to write so many cautions against visions and images, later gave the pen sketch to one of his devout penitents at the Incarnation, Ana María de Jesús. She guarded it until the time of her death in 1618, when she gave it to María Pinel who was later to become prioress.

In 1641, at the time of Madre María's death, the drawing was placed in a small monstrance, elliptical in shape, where it was conserved until 1968. It was then sent for study and restoration to the Central Institute in Madrid for the conservation and restoration of works of art. Now restored and provided with a new reliquary, it is once more available for all to see at the Incarnation in Avila. The French Carmelite biographer of St. John of the Cross, Bruno de Jésus-Marie, in 1945 and 1950 discussed the drawing with two renowned Spanish painters of the twentieth century, José María Sert and Salvador Dalí. The former turned the drawing sideways and interpreted the work to represent the cross leaning forward like a crucifix pressed to the lips of a dying man. Christ is seen then as dragging away from it, his arms stretched almost to the breaking point, his head bent. However, careful study of the drawing has since demonstrated that John's crucified Christ is in a vertical position.

Dalí, in turn, was inspired to do a painting from a similar perspective, "The Christ of St. John of the Cross." In Dalí's painting, in contrast to John's original drawing, the crucified body reminds one more of a Greek god than of the suffering servant. René Huyghe, once Conservator-in-Chief of the paintings in the Museum of the Louvre, wrote concerning the Spanish Carmelite's drawing:

Saint John of the Cross escapes right out of those visual habits by which all artists form a part of their period. He knows nothing of the rules and limitations of contemporary vision; he is not dependent on the manner of seeing current in his century; he is dependent on nothing but the object of his contemplation....The vertical perspective — bold, almost violent, emphasized by light and shade — in which he caught his Christ on the cross cannot be matched in contemporary art; in the context of that art it is hardly imaginable.



CHRIST CRUCIFIED
A DRAWING BY ST. JOHN OF THE CROSS