

St. John of the Cross: Reformer

Written by Fr. Stephen Sanchez, OCD

“He who truly walks in love lets himself lose all things immediately in order to be found more attached to what he loves.” Spiritual Canticle, 29, 10

St. John of the Cross (born Juan de Yepes, 1542 in Fontiveros, Spain) lived during a time of an all-encompassing upheaval in religious, political, social, and economic areas. Much like today, this upheaval was a consequence of decisions taken by people of influence who only considered their own interests and had not given serious consideration to the potential consequences. A short list of ‘goings –on’ on the continent:

Year	Event
1527	Rome is sacked by the Spanish Grand Duke of Alba in favor of the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V to force Charles’ coronation
1528	Charles receives the final two crowns of the Holy Roman Emperor from the hands of the pope; ‘The Question’ of the royal ‘divorce’ of Henry VIII and Catherine of Aragon is raised in England
1531	Pizzaro begins the battle to conquer Peru and Chile
1535	Henry VIII has Bishop John Fisher and statesman Thomas Moore beheaded and the Carthusian monks of the London Charterhouse are martyred
1536	Henry VIII begins the suppression of the monasteries loyal to the Pope; Michelangelo begins to paint the <i>Last Judgment</i> in the Sistine Chapel
1541	Calvin organizes his church in Geneva and Knox in Scotland; John was born, the future Jesuit Saint Francis Xavier arrives in Goa, India; Catherine Howard, the fifth wife of Henry VIII of England was executed; Queen Mary, Queen of Scots became Queen at one week of age.

The Church, at least the part which is in the world, also suffered the consequences of having to live in these historical situations. Another social reality was that of the social decay that had come about after years of war, famine, and the result of various plagues, especially the consequences of the Black Death. One of the logical consequences of the social decay was the decline in religious life which led to the relaxation of guidelines within religious orders. John of St. Matthias (John of the Cross) in his own early life as a Carmelite saw this decline and was desirous of living a more ‘strict’ life; a return to the Rule before the mitigations (relaxations) granted because of the reality of the social decay. He believed, as did others of his time, it was necessary to reinstitute the Rules to their original rigor. He was thinking of leaving the Order of Carmelites and joining the more contemplative Carthusian Order when he met Teresa of Jesus in Salamanca in 1567. John was in Salamanca to ‘sing’ his first Mass as priest and Teresa was there making preparations for another foundation of the reform of the nuns. She convinced him to stay and help her with the reform of the Carmelite Order that she had begun with the nuns in Avila.

On November 28, 1568, John took the new religious name of John of the Cross as he received the habit of the ‘Discalced’ Carmelites from the hands of Teresa of Jesus in the tiny hamlet of Duruelo with two other friars (Anthony of Jesus and John of Christ) who also received the habit, thus giving birth to the Order of the Discalced Carmelite Brothers of Our Lady of Mount Carmel. Discalced means ‘unshod’. It was a common religious term used at the time to distinguish Orders who had undertaken the task of returning their respective religious Rules in

their rigor; so, there were Discalced Franciscans of the Alcantarine Reform, Discalced Augustinians, etc.

The 'reform' of the Carmelite Order was taken as an affront by the older branch of the friars and nuns, and both Teresa and John suffered persecutions from among their own in addition to all of the other hardships of this endeavor. During this time of budding reform, John was confessor to the nuns at the Monastery of the Incarnation. Teresa, as Prioress of the community, wanted John as their confessor. She knew he would be a good help for the nuns to grow in their own understanding of religious life as a cloistered nun.

The persecution of John and Teresa continued to grow. It was during this surge of persecution that John was kidnapped in the middle of the night. On December 2, 1577, John of the Cross and Germán of St. Matthias were taken from the chaplain's quarters and whisked away in a carriage to a monastery of the Friars of the Ancient Observance (older branch). A few days later John was taken and put in a prison cell, the location of which he knew not. It was this imprisonment which lasted about 9 months that brought forth his poetry which is still considered the best of the Spanish language.

During this solitary confinement he was constantly told what a bad religious he was and that he was in a prison because of his refusing to renounce the reform. During this time he was not allowed to celebrate the Divine Office or to celebrate the Eucharist. Failing to do either at the time was considered to be a grave fault and a mortal sin. In his mind, all this suffering was a result of his desire to live a life of simplicity, dedicated to Christ whom he loved above and beyond all created things.

Several months later, as the Feast of the Assumption was approaching, John desperately desired to celebrate the Eucharist in honor of this great work of God in human history. (He later recounted that it was through the intercession of Our Lady that he managed to escape.) One dark night he managed to escape and figure out that he was in Toledo. He found his way to the Discalced Nuns there who took him in and cared for him. Later he would be taken in by Don Pedro Gonzalez de Mendoza, a philanthropist and administrator of a charitable hospital in Toledo. He eventually made his way back home and continued with Teresa in strengthening the reform that Christ desired Teresa to begin.

Today, more than 400 years later, and in many countries across the world, the Discalced Carmelite Order continues to live the religious way of life set out by Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross.