

Pope Benedict on St. John of the Cross

On 16th February 2011, during his general audience in Rome, Pope Benedict XVI focussed on St. John of the Cross during the third in a series of catecheses on the Doctors of the Church.

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Two weeks ago I presented the figure of the great Spanish mystic Teresa of Jesus. Today I would like to speak about another important saint of that land, a spiritual friend of St. Teresa, a reformer, and like St. Teresa, a member of the Carmelite religious family: St. John of the Cross, proclaimed a Doctor of the Church by Pope Pius XI in 1926, and who is traditionally referred to as *Doctor Mysticus*, the “Mystical Doctor”.

John of the Cross was born in 1542 in the small village of Fontiveros, near Avila, in Castilla la Vieja, son of Gonzalo de Yepes and Catalina Álvarez. The family was very poor because the father, of noble birth from Toledo, was expelled from his home and disinherited for having married Catalina, a humble silk weaver. John’s father died when the youth was very young, and at nine years old John went with his mother and brother Francisco to Medina del Campo, near Valladolid, a commercial and cultural centre. Here he attended the ‘Colegio de los Doctrinos’, also carrying out humble works for the nuns of the church-convent of Magdalen.

Subsequently, given his human qualities and the results of his studies, he was admitted first as nurse in the Hospital of the Conception and later in the College of the Jesuits, just founded in Medina del Campo. John entered it at 18 and studied social sciences, rhetoric and classical languages for three years. At the end of his formation, his vocation was very clear to him: the religious life and, among the many orders present in Medina, he felt called to the Carmel.

In the summer of 1563 he began his novitiate among the Carmelites of the city, taking the religious name of Matthew. The following year he was sent to the prestigious University of Salamanca, where he studied Philosophy and Arts for three years. In 1567, he was ordained priest and returned to Medina del Campo to celebrate his first Mass surrounded by the affection of his family.

It was precisely here that the first meeting took place between John and Teresa of Jesus. The meeting was decisive for both: Teresa set forth her plan for the reform of Carmel also in the masculine branch, and suggested that John adhere to it “for the greater glory of God”. The young priest was fascinated by Teresa’s ideas, to the point of becoming a great supporter of the project. They both worked together for some months, sharing ideals and proposals to open as soon as possible the first house of Discalced Carmelites. The opening took place on 28th December 1568, in Duruelo, a solitary place in the province of Avila.

With John, the first masculine community was formed with three other companions. On renewing their religious profession according to the Primitive Rule, the four adopted new names: John then called himself “of the Cross,” the name with which he would later be known universally. At the end of 1572, at the request of St. Teresa, he became confessor and vicar of the Monastery of the Incarnation in Avila, where the saint was prioress. They were years of close collaboration and spiritual friendship, which enriched them both. During that period were written the most important Teresian works and John’s first writings.

Adherence to the Carmelite reform was not easy, and it even resulted in grave suffering for John. The most dramatic incident was his seizure and imprisonment in 1577 in the convent of the Carmelites of the Ancient Observance of Toledo, which was the result of an unjust accusation. The

saint remained in prison for six months, subjected to privations and physical and moral constraints. Here he composed, along with other poems, the famous *Spiritual Canticle*. Finally, on the night of 16th-17th August 1578, he was able to escape in a hazardous way, taking refuge in the monastery of the Discalced Carmelites of the city. St. Teresa and his companions celebrated his liberation with great joy and, after a brief time to regain his strength, John was sent to Andalusia, where he spent 10 years in several convents, especially in Granada. He took on increasingly important posts in the order, eventually becoming provincial vicar, and completed the writing of his spiritual treatises.

Then he returned to the land of his birth, as a member of the general government of the Teresian religious family, which now enjoyed full juridical autonomy. He lived in the Carmel of Segovia, carrying out the office of superior of that community. In 1591, he was relieved of all responsibility and destined to the new religious Province of Mexico. While preparing for the long journey with 10 companions, he retired to a solitary convent near Jaen, where he became seriously ill.

John faced with exemplary serenity and patience enormous sufferings. He died on the night of 13th-14th December 1591, while his brothers recited the Morning Office. He took leave of them saying: "Today I am going to sing the Office in Heaven". His mortal remains were taken to Segovia. He was beatified by Clement X in 1675, and canonized by Benedict XIII in 1726.

John is considered one of the most important lyric poets of Spanish literature. His most important works are four: *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, *Dark Night of the Soul*, *Spiritual Canticle*, and *Living Flame of Love*.

In the *Spiritual Canticle*, St. John presents the path of purification of the soul, that is, the progressive joyful possession of God until the soul feels that it loves God with the same love that it is loved by him.

The *Living Flame of Love* continues in this perspective, describing in greater detail the transforming union with God. The example used by John is always that of fire: as the fire burns and consumes the wood, it becomes incandescent flame, so also the Holy Spirit, who during the dark night purifies and "cleanses" the soul, then in time illumines and warms it as if it were a flame. The life of the soul is a continuous celebration of the Holy Spirit, that enables one to perceive the glory of the union with God in eternity.

The *Ascent of Mount Carmel* presents the spiritual itinerary from the point of view of the progressive purification of the soul, necessary to ascend to the summit of Christian perfection, symbolized by the summit of Mount Carmel. This purification is proposed as a journey that man undertakes, collaborating with divine action to free the soul from all attachment or affection contrary to the will of God. The purification, which to arrive at union of love with God must be total, begins with the way of the senses and continues with the one obtained through the three theological virtues – faith, hope and charity – the purification of intention, memory and will.

The *Dark Night* describes the "passive" aspect, that is, God's intervention in the process of "purification" of the soul. On its own, in fact, human effort is incapable of getting to the profound roots of the person's bad inclinations and habits: it can restrain them, but not uproot them totally. To do so, the special action of God is necessary, which purifies the spirit radically and disposes it to the union of love with him. St. John describes this purification as "passive" precisely because, though accepted by the soul, it is realized by the mysterious action of the Holy Spirit who, as a flame of fire, consumes every impurity. In this state, the soul is subjected to all types of trials, as if it were in a dark night.

These indications on the saint's principal works help us to approach the outstanding points of his vast and profound mystical doctrine, whose objective is to describe a sure way to arrive at sanctity, the state of perfection to which God calls us all. According to John of the Cross, everything that exists, created by God, is good. Through creatures, we can come to the discovery of the One who has left his imprint on them. Faith, however, is the only source given to man to know God exactly as he is in himself, as God One and Triune. All that God willed to communicate to man he said in Jesus Christ, his Word made flesh. He, Jesus Christ, is the only and definitive way to the Father (cf. *John* 14:6). Anything created is nothing compared with God, and nothing is true outside of him. Consequently, to come to perfect love of God, every other love must be conformed in Christ to divine love.

This is where John of the Cross derives his insistence on the need for purification and interior emptying in order to be transformed in God, which is the sole end of perfection. This "purification" does not consist in the simple physical lack of things or of their use. What the pure and free soul does, instead, is to eliminate every disordered dependence on things. Everything must be placed in God as centre and end of life. The long and difficult process of purification exacts personal effort, but the true protagonist is God: all that man can do is to "dispose" himself, to be open to the divine action and not place obstacles in its way.

Living the theological virtues, man is elevated and gives value to his own effort. The rhythm of growth of faith, hope and charity goes in step with the work of purification and with progressive union with God until one is transformed in him. When one arrives at this end, the soul is submerged in the very Trinitarian life, such that St. John affirms that the soul is able to love God with the same love with which he loves it, because he loves it in the Holy Spirit. This is why the Mystical Doctor holds that there is no true union of love with God if it does not culminate in the Trinitarian union. In this supreme state the holy soul knows everything in God and no longer has to go through creatures to come to him. The soul now feels inundated by divine love and is completely joyful in it.

Dear brothers and sisters, in the end the question remains: Does this saint with his lofty mysticism, with this arduous way to the summit of perfection, have something to say to us, to the ordinary Christian who lives in the circumstances of today's life, or is he only an example, a model for a few chosen souls who can really undertake this way of purification, of mystical ascent? To find the answer we must first of all keep present that the life of St. John of the Cross was not a "flight through mystical clouds", but was a very hard life, very practical and concrete, both as reformer of the order, where he met with much opposition, as well as provincial superior, as in the prison of his brothers of religion, where he was exposed to incredible insults and bad physical treatment. It was a hard life but, precisely in the months spent in prison, he wrote one of his most beautiful works. And thus we are able to understand that the way with Christ, the going with Christ, "the Way", is not a weight added to the already sufficient burden, but something completely different, it is a light, a strength that helps us carry this burden.

If a man has a great love within him, it's as if this love gives him wings, and he endures life's problems more easily, because he has in himself that light, which is faith: to be loved by God and to let oneself be loved by God in Christ Jesus. This act of allowing oneself to be loved is the light that helps us to carry our daily burden. And holiness is not our work, our difficult work, but rather it is precisely this "openness": Open the windows of the soul so that the light of God can enter, do not forget God because it is precisely in opening oneself to his light that strength is found, as well as the joy of the redeemed. Let us pray to the Lord so that he will help us to find this sanctity, to allow ourselves to be loved by God, which is the vocation of us all, as well as being true redemption. Thank you.

[Translation from the original Italian based on that by ZENIT]