

15. John of the Cross Prays Matins in Heaven

As John of the Cross became aware that his life was coming to a close, he realized more than ever the wisdom of his saying that he had shared with others: "When evening comes you will be examined in love" (Sayings, 60). In this topic, we will explore the final chapters of John's life and his lasting spiritual legacy.

I. Segovia: In 1588, John of the Cross left Andalusia to become prior of the Carmelite convent in Segovia. In that same year he was elected first councilor in a new form of government among the Discalced Carmelites.

John, now prior in Segovia, returned to his beloved Castile. The Carmelites had come to Segovia several years before to take over a rundown discarded convent. John of the Cross was commissioned to oversee the construction of a new convent and church. Besides leading a large community and head up the new construction, John continued to offer spiritual guidance to the many who sought his advice. He acquired new property and liked to work in the garden. Yet, John, as always, found time for solitude and prayer. There were caves on the property, where shepherds used to take refuge in the cold weather. John was in the habit of frequenting one of those caves as a place for prayer.

John's directee Ana del Mercado y Penalosa moved to Segovia to be near him for guidance. Ana was a wealthy widow who underwrote significantly John's building projects in Segovia. When John died, Ana insisted that John's body be brought back to Segovia. One can visit John's remains at the monastery of the Carmelite nuns in Segovia.

While John was prior in Segovia, his brother Francisco was able to visit him. Francisco and his wife, Ana Izquierda, had lost five children. John was able to console his pious and simple brother who was very, very dear to John. John's warm and caring relationship with Francisco and his mother, Catalina, and his loving care for his fellow friars offer a balanced perspective on John's teaching on detachment. John encouraged his disciples to become free in their order relationships so that there was space for God to fill them with His love. John was convinced that our love of Jesus puts in order all other relationships.

The years in Segovia were a happy time for John. For one thing, he did not have the hassle of constant travel. But troubling days were ahead. In Madrid, in June of 1591, Fray Nicholas Doria was re-elected superior of the Discalced Carmelites while, to the puzzlement of many, John of the Cross did not receive a single office.

II. La Penuela: The 1591 chapter decided to heed the request for friars to be sent to Mexico. John happily was chosen to become a missionary to Mexico, and John made plans for departure. However, this mission had to be scuttled and, in any case, John became too ill to travel to the New World.

Free of administrative positions, John chose to go to the convent at La Penuela, a very out of the way location that today is a small town known as La Carolina. John much enjoyed his time at La Penuela, where he had some time to do a little editing of his writing, probably "The Living Flame of Love." □ Three of John's surviving letters are from La Penuela. In one of these letters, to Dona Ana del Mercado y Penalosa, John wrote of his work in the garden and his gathering of chickpeas.

John was never adverse to manual labor, obvious in his construction of the aqueduct at Los Martires and the heavy construction work at Segovia.

It was at La Penuela that John contracted erysipelas on his right leg and foot, a disease that we now know is caused by a streptococcus infection. When the infection worsened, John was persuaded to travel to Ubeda, an urban area not far away. A young boy was enlisted to travel with John. The youngster tried to get John to take something to eat, and John replied that he would like to have some asparagus. The boy found some on a rock and, as instructed by John, left a few coins on the rock as compensation.

III. John's Death in Ubeda: In September of 1591, John arrived in Ubeda, a place he was never to leave. Even in these final months of his life, the gentle, sensitive, and compassionate John suffered at the hands of his brother Carmelites. Diego Evangelista was bent on destroying John's reputation. Diego carried on with his scurrilous mission even after John died. Locally, the prior at Ubeda, Fray Francisco Crisostomo, held a grudge against John of the Cross. Fray Francisco even begrudged John medicine on the pretext that the convent could not afford it. John's kindness to Francisco brought the stingy prior to his knees weeping, and led to his conversion.

John's disease progressed with much pain including that which came from an incision meant to reduce infection. The physician, Ambrosio de Villareal, apologized to John. In turn, John gave Ambrosio a manuscript copy of "The Living Flame of Love."

On the 13th of December, 1591, the Carmelite community gathered around the dying friar. John's condition worsened during the day. There was a rope hung so

that John could lift himself. He joked that he had, indeed, become very light. John told those gathered in his cell that he looked forward to praying matins in heaven with our Lady. When the community was about to begin the prayers for the dying, John requested that instead someone recite the Song of Songs. He was heard to say: "O, what precious pearls." The Song of Songs was more than an ancient text for John; it was a graced way of coming to know more fully God's lavish love.

John of the Cross died shortly after midnight in time for matins in heaven. He was not beatified until 1675, or canonized until 1726. He was declared a doctor of the church in 1926. Now, both Christians and non-Christians have a sense that John of the Cross has important spiritual guidance for them. There is ever so much that one could say about John of the Cross, but it is time to say merely: Follow your instincts, if they beckon you to read the writings. They have been immensely profitable to many who have sought his guidance.

Review Questions

1. From what you now know about John of the Cross what would encourage you to read his writings?
2. Would you recommend to a friend that she or he consider reading the poetry and other books of John of the Cross?
3. What aspect of John's life most intrigues you?