

2. The Weavers' Son

John of the Cross is one of the truly great mystics and spiritual writers of the Christian tradition. This great saint, however, had humble beginnings. In this topic, we will examine how this son of weavers grew to become a wise mystic. We will look at his family, early life, and education, which all contributed to his message of love.

I. Traditional Prayer to the Holy Spirit: John of the Cross insists that the principal guide of one's spiritual life is the Holy Spirit. "Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful. Enkindle in them the fire of your divine love. Send forth Your Spirit and they shall be created. And You shall renew the face of the earth. Let us pray... O God, who by the light of the Holy Spirit, instructed the hearts of your faithful, grant that by that same Holy Spirit, we may be truly wise and ever rejoice in your holy consolation. Through Christ our Lord, Amen."

II. Love and Compassion: Love is the message of John of the Cross as it was the message of Jesus of Nazareth. John of the Cross has a reputation for harshness that is undeserved. His compassion for the poor, the ill, the young, and the aged will be a theme that emerges often in these presentations.

III. The Family of Juan de Yepes: He was the third son of Catalina Alvarez and Gonzalo de Yepes. Catalina was a poor weaver whom Gonzalo encountered on his journeys on behalf of his well-to-do family of silk merchants. When Catalina and Gonzalo married, Gonzalo's family disowned him, leaving the young starcrossed couple in dire poverty. Doomed to a life of poverty, Gonzalo joined Catalina in her weaving. Later their son Juan responded to someone: "I am only a weaver's son," in fact, he was the weavers' son.

Juan was only a toddler when his father died and only five when his brother Luis died. From then on, Catalina was the single parent of two sons, Francisco and Juan. Francisco was much older than Juan and mentally on the slow side, while Juan was very bright. Juan's mother saw to it that Juan received every educational advantage available to a poor boy. Juan had a great affection for his brother. He once said: "Meet my brother, he is the gift I most cherish in the world." Juan's relationship with his mother was very important to him. That close relationship may have made possible the mature relationships that Juan had with women throughout his life.

IV. Education and Early Life: Catalina enrolled Juan in a Catechism school for the poor where he had various duties including running errands for the nuns. As an adolescent, Juan became what we would call an orderly at the Hospital de las

Bubas, a hospital that served those with infectious diseases like syphilis. As he had done for the nuns, Juan went begging for alms on behalf the hospital. Juan's experiences of poverty and his tenderness toward the patients set the stage for a lifelong journey of gentle and compassionate care for anyone in need.

Once more as a poor boy, Juan attended the recently opened college of the Jesuits in Medina del Campo, where he received a solid liberal education that included the study of the ancient Latin writers. It was at this college that Juan no doubt learned to write verse. This poor young man would become the author of some of Spain's and the world's greatest poetry as well as a mystic's mystic, renowned for the depth of his mystical writings.

Juan de Yepes, later known as John of the Cross, grew up in poverty but with the solicitous care of a mother of deep faith, who lavished her love on her two sons and saw to it that her gifted son, Juan, was well educated and grounded in faith. Catalina's solicitude has given the world a saint and doctor of the church. Juan de Yepes learned to love from his warm and caring mother, Catalina. Throughout his life, Juan showed that he learned well the lessons that his mother passed on in word and example.

Years later, as a Carmelite friar in Granada, where he was known as John of the Cross, he wrote to a young woman, Juana de Pedraza: "O great God of Love, and Lord! How many riches do you place in the soul that neither loves nor is satisfied save in you alone, for you give yourself to it and become one with it through love." (Letter 11)

Review Questions

1. What impression do most people have of John of the Cross and his teachings?
2. Ask yourself: what meaning is there in Catalina's loving care and concern for her son, Juan?
3. Does the boyhood of John of the Cross offer lessons for our contemporary religious culture?