

3. The Encounter with Teresa of Avila

As John writes, "After all, this love is the end for which we were created" (CB 29.3). Teresa of Avila was a great reformer of the Carmelites in Spain. The first female doctor of the Church, she brimmed with wisdom. In the sixteenth century, she and John of the Cross would meet, resulting in a great meeting of minds,

I. Teresa of Avila: Teresa of Avila was active in the early stages of the reform of the Carmelites in Spain. Teresa had been a nun in the Carmelite Monastery of the Incarnation just outside of the walls of Avila for several decades. A profound encounter with the divine when she was thirty-nine changed Teresa and initiated a life as one of the Church's major mystics.

The Incarnation was a very large monastery with more than a hundred and fifty nuns. Teresa and her friends discussed how to live a deeper life of prayer. Teresa was impressed by what she knew of the lives of the early hermits on Mount Carmel, and she wanted to recapture the spirit of these hermits. Teresa decided at first that her monasteries should have 12 nuns plus a prioress. Later to insure that the nuns could support themselves the number rose to 20. In 1562, Teresa founded in Avila her first new monastery in 1562. The Carmelite Reform was underway. Teresa wanted her monasteries to be places where women could flourish in prayer. It soon became evident to her that these nuns would need spiritual guidance from competent and experienced Carmelites. Hence, she had to recruit Carmelite friars to join her reform so that they could act as guides and confessors for her new monasteries.

II A Memorable Meeting: Word reached Teresa of a young Carmelite friar who had a reputation for holiness. He was none other than fray Juan de Santo Matia. Teresa who was in Medina del Campo to found a new monastery arranged to meet Juan who had been there to celebrate his first mass, but he had not yet returned to Salamanca.

The meeting between Teresa and John was truly memorable. Teresa described it in this way: "...when I spoke with this young friar, he pleased me very much." When Teresa told John of her need for friars, he responded that he was thinking of becoming a Carthusian monk. The young friar must have yearned for a solitude that he did not experience in his order at that time. John gave Teresa a conditional yes. He would join her reform if he didn't "have to wait too long." If John were anything, he was single-minded; his priority clearly was prayer. Teresa was no slacker herself and was quickly moving ahead with her reform.

After his meeting with Teresa, John returned to Salamanca where he studied theology for a year. Once he completed that year, he made himself available for Teresa's reform. From then on Teresa and John's names would forevermore be linked to each other. Yet, while John collaborated closely with Teresa, their relationship was not like that of Francis and Clare or Francis de Sales and Jane Frances de Chantal. Rather Teresa's closest male confidante was fray Jerome Gracian.

III. The Spirit of Reform: Teresa's idea of reform was a return to what she knew, not quite accurately, as the primitive Carmelite Rule. To introduce Juan de Santo Matia to the spirit of the reform, Teresa invited Juan to accompany her when she made a new foundation in Valladolid.

This was an opportunity "to teach Father Fray John of the Cross about our way of life." She concluded that "He was so good that I, at least could have learned much more from him than he from me. Yet this is not what I did, but I taught him about the lifestyle of the Sisters." In addition, Teresa wanted John to realize the importance that she placed on common recreation for her nuns (Book of Her Foundations 13.5).

Teresa was given a ramshackle barn in the tiny village of Duruelo, so far into nowhere that Teresa got lost when she went to view the building. The structure was in very bad shape. But La Madre, as Teresa was known, was determined to launch her reform of the friars so she accepted the gift.

Teresa visited Duruelo after the friars took up residence. She was shocked at their austerity. She watched them praying unaware that snow covered their habits as they prayed. Thus was inaugurated the Discalced Carmelite friars. Juan de Santo Matia to symbolize his new identity from now on called himself Juan de la Cruz, John of the Cross just as Teresa, once her reform got underway, was no longer Dona Teresa de Ahumada y Cepeda but she was known simply as Teresa of Jesus. For Teresa and John Jesus was everything, as John wrote: "After a long time he climbed a tree, / and spread his shining arms, / and hung by them, and died, / his heart an open wound with love" (John's Poem, 7).

Review Questions

1. What thoughts come to mind as you ponder this reform of a religious order by a woman with no formal education and a collaborator twenty-seven years younger than she?

2. What do you think of John's decision not to pursue an academic career in theology, considering he still had a significant impact on the subsequent theology of the mystical life?

3. Ponder the significance of Teresa's choice to call herself Teresa of Jesus and of John's choice to call himself John of the Cross.