

## 5. John of the Cross: Prisoner

Let us reflect upon the wisdom of St. John of the Cross: "Anyone truly in love will let other things go in order to come closer to the loved one" (CB 29.10). On the cold wintry day of December 2, 1577, John of the Cross was kidnapped from his tiny residence next to the Incarnation. The Friars of the Cloth, as Teresa called them, dragged John a distance of roughly sixty eight miles to the Carmelite convent in Toledo. In this topic, we will look at the impact of this imprisonment on John and his poetry.

**1. John of the Cross in Prison:** John's kidnappers alleged that John was rebellious and that the Teresian Reform would ruin the Carmelite Order. In fairness, one must realize that the lines of authority at the time were inconsistent, and communication from a variety of sources was far from clear. That said, the treatment of John of the Cross was cruel and uncalled for.

Religious orders had rooms designated as prison cells for recalcitrant members. First, John was placed in a prison cell and then taken to a room that was easier to monitor. John spent nine months secretly imprisoned at Toledo in a very small cell, approximately nine by six feet, with a small slit on one upper wall that allowed very little light in.

During the same time that John was imprisoned in Toledo, El Greco, the painter, came to Toledo. In the 1940's, an early modern biographer of John of the Cross edited a book *Three Mystics* with illustrations by El Greco that show why many see El Greco's paintings as reminiscent of John of the Cross.

John of the Cross's treatment at Toledo was inhuman; yet, reports of this ill treatment at John's beatification proceedings may have exaggerated the facts. Yet, after John's escape, Teresa wrote to Gracian: "I tell you that ever present to me is what they did with Fray John of the Cross, for I don't know how God bears with things like that... For all those nine months he was held in a little prison cell where small as he is, he could hardly fit. In all that time he was given no change of tunic, even though he had come close to the point of death. Only three days before his escape the sub-prior gave him one of his shirts. He underwent harsh scourges, and no one was allowed to see him... Surely our Lord found in him the resources for such a martyrdom... An investigation should be conducted to show the nuncio what those friars did to this saint." (Teresa, Letter 260)

**II. A Changed Man:** There is much paradox concerning the imprisonment of John of the Cross. The unjust and cruel treatment of John by his brothers could easily

have turned him into an angry and even vengeful man. Added to the physical mistreatment, his loyalty and sincerity were severely called into question by his captors, and he was fed false information about what was going on in the reform. Even a resolute and well balanced friar could have been turned into a very bitter person.

Yet, John of the Cross emerged from his terrible confinement a changed man, a holier and more loving person than he had been before his imprisonment. After his imprisonment, John of the Cross had not a vengeful bone in his body. Rather, he left his prison cell as someone who was madly in love with God and who treated everyone with exceptional kindness. From prison, he brought with him poetry that revealed how deeply he had grown in love with his Beloved.

The last three months of John's imprisonment were less severe than the previous six months. A more humane friar was appointed as John's jailer. This friar, John of Holy Mary, gave testimony at John's beatification process in 1616. At that time, he attested to John's holiness and his gratitude for everything that was done for him. This friar called John a "saint," and he reported that John had given him a crucifix that John of the Cross wore under his scapular, a crucifix that may well have been a gift from Saint Teresa. In 1616, the benign jailer still cherished this gift from his prisoner.

**III. Prison Imagery:** Although John did not compose his "Dark Night" poem in prison, imagery from his prison experience appears in the commentary and may have been a reflection of how he suffered in prison: a description of "hanging in midair, unable to breathe" (N 2.6.5), or of "one liberated from a cramped prison cell" (N 2.1.1). He also wrote: "they resembled one who is imprisoned in a dark dungeon, bound hands and feet, and able neither to move nor see nor feel any favor from heaven or earth » (N 2.7.3). This vivid imagery most likely was ingrained in him during the dark, dreadful days in Toledo.

John of the Cross left his prison more of a God seeker than he had ever been before, carrying with him these lines from "The Spiritual Canticle." Stanza 1: "Where have you hidden, / Beloved, and left me moaning? You fled like the stag, / after wounding me; / I went out calling you, but you were gone."

### **Review Questions**

1. What lessons does John of the Cross's experience and imprisonment hold for us in times of suffering?

2. Can you think of ways that John must have tried to cope with his inhuman treatment in prison?

3. What regimen would you use to grow in faith, hope, and love were you to face unjust treatment?