

8. John of the Cross: Sojourn in Andalusia

Let us again reflect on the magnificent words of St. John of the Cross: "I said: How can I sing, in a strange land where I weep for Zion, sing of the happiness that I had there?" (Romance on Ps. 137). In this topic, we will discuss the time that John spent in the southern region of Andalusia, where he met Ana of Jesus.

I. John of the Cross in Andalusia: John of the Cross spent a decade (1578-1588) in the southern Spanish region called Andalusia. For most of his time there, John felt like an exile and missed his homeland of Castile. In 1581, John wrote to Catalina de Jesus, a spiritual directee: "...be consoled with the thought that you are not as abandoned and alone as I am down here. For after that whale swallowed me up and vomited me out on this alien port, I have never merited to see her [Teresa] again or the saints up there. God has done well, for after all, abandonment is a steel file and the endurance of darkness leads to great light." (Letter 1) The whale is a reference to Jonah 2:1-2 and his imprisonment in Toledo.

John missed his fellow Carmelites in Castile, as well as his mother and Francisco. Teresa wrote to Padre Gracian about John being a stranger in Andalusia: "I forgot to ask you for something as an Easter gift; please God you will do it. You should know that up until now in consoling Fray John of the Cross for the suffering he endures living in Andalusia (for he cannot bear those people) I told him that as soon as we became a separate province I would see to it that he got back up here" (Teresa, Letter, 384.4).

John's homesickness in Andalusia revealed John's most vulnerable and human side. These feelings echo a conviction of mysticism Map of Andalusia that mystical transformation is a journey into full humanity. Despite his negative feelings, this decade in Andalusia was very productive. During this time John was a very busy administrator; moreover, John composed some of his most beautiful poetry and commentaries while he was in Andalusia. Finally, as we will come to see, John would die in Andalusia.

II. Ana of Jesus: While John was superior at the Discalced convent of El Calvario, he also served as a spiritual guide and confessor to the Carmelite nuns at Beas de Segura. Each Saturday he made his way on foot some six miles over mountainous terrain to minister to the nuns. Ana of Jesus was the young prioress at Beas who, when John first stopped there on his way to El Calvario, took offense that John referred to Teresa as "my daughter." Teresa soon put her young friend in her place. "I was amused daughter, at how groundless is your complaining, for you have in your very midst mi padre Fray John of the Cross, a heavenly and divine man. I tell

you, daughter, from the time he left and went down there I have not found anyone in all Castile like him, or anyone who communicates so much fervor for walking along the way to heaven. You will not believe the feeling of loneliness that his absence causes me. Realize what a great treasure you have there in that saint" (Teresa, Letter 277).

John of the Cross and Ana of Jesus became very good friends, and he dedicated "The Spiritual Canticle" to her. In the prologue to that commentary, John wrote to Ana that "even though Your Reverence lacks training in scholastic theology, through which the divine truths are understood, you are not wanting in mystical theology, which is known through love and by which these truths are not only known but at the same time enjoyed" (N. 3).

There is a record of a memorable conversation at Beas between John and Magdalene of the Holy Spirit, who made copies of John's poems and some of his Sayings. Magdalene reported on this conversation as follows, "The freshness of the words in this book [John's poems], together with their beauty and subtlety, caused me great wonder, and one day I asked him if God gave him these words which were so comprehensive and so lovely. And he answered: 'Daughter, sometimes God gave them to me and at other times I sought them'" (E. A. Peers, *The Works of John of the Cross*, vol. 3, p. 298).

In 1579, John founded a Discalced Carmelite convent at the Ana of Jesus University of Baeza, a university that had been established by Saint John of Avila, to provide pastoral education and formation. During the three years that John was the rector of this house, he made a deep impression on the academics and others in Baeza. There, John was given property outside the town where he and his student friars could relax, pray, and admire nature. John loved nature and derived many images from creation.

In 1582, when Teresa was unavailable, John took Ana of Jesus with him to found a monastery of nuns in Granada. Later that year, Teresa of Jesus died, much to the grief of John and Teresa's nuns. Only a few years before in 1580, John lost the most important woman in his life, his mother Catalina. She died during a severe epidemic of influenza that struck Spanish cities severely in that year. You could say that much of John's gentleness and compassion was instilled in him by Catalina. There are reports of John caring for influenza victims during 1580, insisting that his friars eat meat to stay healthy, which they ordinarily abstained from, and telling stories and jokes to take their minds off their suffering.

III. Carmen de los Martires: In 1582, John became prior of the Carmelite convent of Los Martires on a site near the Alhambra looking out over the lovely city of Granada. John spent six years at this unbelievably beautiful site where he built an aqueduct that brought water to the convent.

In these gorgeous surroundings, which include the snow-capped mountains of the Sierra Nevada, John composed most of his commentaries and some of his most magnificent poetry. I leave you with a brief sample of that beauty, Stanza 13 of "The Spiritual Canticle": "My Beloved, the mountains/and lonely wooded valleys/ strange islands/and resounding rivers, / the whistling of love-stirring breezes."

Review Questions

1. What can we learn from John's feeling of exile in Andalusia and his productivity there?
2. Does it help to recall that John of the Cross, who has acquired in modern times a reputation for harshness, had close and mature relationships with the women in his life?
3. What does it mean that John of the Cross, a mystic's mystic, had so profound an appreciation for the beauty of creation?