

9. John of the Cross: Poet

John of the Cross, doctor of desire, wrote with simple beauty of his desire for the Trinitarian life that he saw in the Eucharist: "This living spring that I long for, /I see in this bread of life although it is night" (Poem 8, stanza 11). In this topic, we will explore the magnificent poetry that John of the Cross wrote.

I. Poetry of John of the Cross: A favorite phrase of John of the Cross was "un no se que" (in English, "I don't know what"). John used this phrase to share with his readers the great and gracious mystery that he encountered in God. These encounters were so ineffable and inexpressible that he had to resort to images, symbols, and especially to poetry to communicate at least partially the goodness and beauty that he encountered. When he becomes almost silent at the conclusion of "The Living Flame of Love." John wrote: "I do not desire to speak of this spiration, filled for the soul with good and glory and delicate love of God, for I am aware of being incapable of doing so; and were I to try, it might seem less than it is" (4.17).

John of the Cross not only had a special gift of transforming encounters with God, he also had a gift that Thomas Aquinas called *gratia sermonis*, that is, the grace of speech, or, a gift for expressing to others something of the mystery of divine encounters.

From the late 17th century until the middle of the 20th century, there was an eclipse of mysticism in Christianity. People became suspicious of mysticism, resulting in the view that mysticism was the preserve of the elite Christians, only the few. The mystical writings of John of the Cross were held hostage to that suspicion. Some religious followers and seminarians were encouraged not to read John of the Cross. John was neglected for far too long.

In the late 19th century, John's poetry was rediscovered by Spanish literary critics who were stunned by the beauty and power of his writing. This discovery led Spanish poets of the first half of the 20th century to revel in the lush poetry of the Carmelite friar. Today, John's poetry remains a staple of Spanish education. Some of John's poetry ranks among the best in the world and certainly is prized as some of the very best in Spain.

John of the Cross encountered great poetry himself, especially classical Latin poetry, while he studied at the Jesuit College in Medina del Campo. During his four years as a student at the University of Salamanca, John would also have heard fellow students singing love poems. There was at Salamanca an enthusiasm for the

evolving Castilian language and a love affair with vernacular poetry. Castilian was still a malleable language that was handmade for someone like John, who wanted to share his mystical encounters with those he guided.

II. John's Oeuvre: One Spanish critic has called John "the greatest of brief poets." The total of his poetry amounts to only a dozen poems, depending how we count them. John probably wrote more poems, but only this small portion is extant. We first hear of John's composition of verse from a note that Saint Teresa sent to her brother Lorenzo: "[Here] is a little song by Fray John of the Cross that they sent me from the Incarnation. Tell him that I told you I greatly enjoyed it. I would like Francisco [Lorenzo's son] to sing it for you" (Teresa. Letter 171). Teresa's Carmels sang especially at recreation. Teresa wrote to Lorenzo again, saying, "The sisters sing everything." This custom was still in vogue in 19th-century France, when Therese of Lisieux composed poems to be sung in her monastery. No melodies with which John's poetry would have been sung are extant.

In the past, John's poetry was divided into what were called his major and minor poems. The major poems were those on which John wrote commentaries: the "Dark Night," the "Spiritual Canticle," and the "Living Flame of Love." These poems have a power, intensity, and beauty that makes them unique. The rest of his poetry was considered minor and of less value. What was not appreciated was that these so-called minor poems were of differing genres, and were romances and ballads instead of purely religious. Remarkable literary riches have been discovered in some of these once unappreciated poems.

When were John's poems composed? There are only two extant poems that were written before John's imprisonment. Most of John's poems were composed during his imprisonment in Toledo, which he shared with the Carmelite nuns in Toledo, Beas, and elsewhere. This program will begin with the romances that John composed in prison. They can be considered a kind of catechism for understanding John's thought.

Juan de la Cruz makes huge claims for some of his poetry. He says that the "Spiritual Canticle" was "composed with a certain burning love of God," and that its lines are "expressions of love arising from mystical understanding" (CB, Prologue 1-2). Of the "Living Flame of Love," John says that "these stanzas treat of a love deeper in quality and more perfect within this very state of transformation [mystical marriage]" (Prologue, 3). In regard to the poem the "Dark Night," John writes that the soul "recites them [the stanzas] when it has reached the state of perfection - that is, union with God through love" (N, prologue).

The poetry of John of the Cross offers readers a vicarious participation in his mystical experience. It is best to begin our study of John of the Cross by becoming thoroughly familiar with his poetry, not reading his commentaries, after attaining a familiarity with the poems. John's poetry fully deserves a place of primacy among his writings. He wanted his readers to accord, as he did, this primacy to his poetry.

John's poems are also useful for personal prayer. Take a line or so and recite them like a mantra. That way, like music, these lines do their "work" long after we finish reciting them. John sang of the spring of life and love that arose in the Triune God when he wrote, "I know that nothing else is so beautiful. / and that the heavens and the earth drink there, although it is night" (Poem 8, stanza 3).

Review Questions

1. What do you think of the advice that you should become thoroughly acquainted with John's poetry before moving on to his commentaries?
2. Do you think that you can find a way to comfortably pray with lines of John's poetry?
3. What do you make of John of the Cross's claim that some of his poetry was written directly out of his mystical encounters with God?