

### **St John of the Cross:**

"Where there is no love, put love and you will get back love."

On a night of darkness,  
In love's anxiety of longing kindled,  
blessed chance!  
left by none beheld,  
My house in sleep and silence stilled...  
By dark of blessed night,  
In secrecy, for no one saw me  
And I regarded nothing,  
My only light and guide  
The one that in my heart was burning...  
O night, you were the guide!  
O night more desirable than dawn!  
O dark of night you joined  
Beloved with belov'd one,  
Belov'd one in Beloved now transformed!

The Renaissance of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries was a time of a growing and increasingly exhilarating exploration of the individual human personality. Even as Europeans were discovering new continents and setting themselves to master them, so they were discovering that darkest and most mysterious of all continents, the human soul, and with the same intrepid attitude of the conquistador, they were determined to map out and master that new terrain. This Renaissance turn to the interior, when exaggerated or uninformed by grace, could result either in abandoning the formal aspects of Christianity entirely, as happened among the more radical Protestant reformers, or in a self-absorbed introspective gaze, as with the sceptic French essayist Michel de Montaigne. For Catholic reformers who sought continuity with the great tradition, there was no interest in overthrowing the forms of Church life - the Sacraments, rites, and hierarchy - but there was a growing desire for an inner encounter with Christ that would correspond to those forms and deepen the life of faith. Much of the zeal of the Catholic Reformation was rooted in a renewed cultivation of the interior life. The Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius were a noteworthy expression of this development. In Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross, the inner ascent to God reached extraordinary heights.

The stanzas at the head of the chapter are from John of the Cross's poem "The Dark Night." Despite the slim number of his poems, John of the Cross has been granted a place in the first rank of Spanish poets, both for the quality and the variety of his work. Yet what is most remarkable about this poem is not the skill of its writer, but

the circumstances under which it was written. John penned this lyrical love song to God just after escaping from a kind of living hell - imprisoned, betrayed, tortured, ignorant of the future, seemingly forgotten and abandoned. What emerges from John's life and teaching is a truth worth pondering: that it was not in spite of, but rather because of, his horrific circumstances that John was so taken by the love of God. In his poetry, in his prose writings, and preeminently in the shape of his life, John points to the mystery of the redemptive nature of the Crucifixion. He was intensely a man of the Cross; and because of that he was an ardent lover and an effective reformer.

The theme of suffering with Christ for the sake of humanity runs like a silken thread through the lives and teaching of all the saints of the Catholic Reformation. From her first conversion to the end of her life, Catherine of Genoa's consuming desire was to unite herself to Christ's sufferings in order to bring goodness to the world. Thomas More was brought to prison and death for his adherence to the Faith, a development that was of a piece with the rest of his life. He once said to his children: "We may not look at our pleasure to go to Heaven in featherbeds; it is not the way, for our Lord Himself went thither with great pain, and by many tribulations, which was the path wherein He walked thither, and the servant may not look to be in better case than his Master."

Ignatius Loyola embraced the same attitude: "If God causes you to suffer much, it is a sign that He has great designs for you, and that He certainly intends to make you a saint. And if you wish to become a great saint entreat Him yourself to give you much opportunity for suffering; for there is no wood better to kindle the fire of holy love than the cross, which Christ used for His own great sacrifice of boundless charity." Ignatius's great disciple Francis Xavier was constantly on the lookout for ways to suffer for Christ.

Once on a sea voyage from Malacca to India, his ship was caught in a terrific monsoon, the worst he had ever seen, and all aboard thought the ship was going down. Amid the fear and fury of the storm, Xavier's eyes were on the way his suffering might be a gain for the Kingdom. He later wrote, "I begged our Lord during the storm that, if I came out of it alive, it might only be to endure others as bad or worse for His greater service."<sup>3</sup> The joyful Philip Neri was of the same school: "The greatness of our love for God must be tested by the desire we have of suffering for his love.... Nothing more glorious can happen to a Christian, than to suffer for Christ. There is no surer or clearer proof of the love of God than adversity." Charles Borromeo and Pius V never complained about the stiff opposition they received in attempting reform; they thought it a necessary part of

God's saving action. Borromeo once wrote: "Christian perfection consists in three things: praying heroically, working heroically, and suffering heroically."

Teresa of Avila, full of interest in all aspects of life as she was, once wrote to her sisters: "I want to make clear to you in what God's will consists. Think not that it is to give you pleasures, richesriches.... He loves you too well to give you these things. Consider what the Father gave Him whom He loved above all - suffering, the Cross - and you will understand what His will is. So long as we are in this world, these are His gifts. He gives them to us according to the love he bears us."6 As with these other saints, so with John of the Cross. One of his "Maxims of Love" goes, "Love consists not in feeling great things but in having great detachment and in suffering for the Beloved."7

**John's Early Life** John de Yepes y Alvarez (to give him his original name) seemed marked out for suffering from his childhood. John was born in a town near Avila in 1542. His father, Gonzalo, was from a wealthy merchant family (like Teresa of Avila's father, probably of Jewish origin), who married a poor orphan girl named Catalina Alvarez. Gonzalo's family was appalled by the match and they disowned Gonzalo, who was forced to take up the economically unstable trade of his wife and become a weaver. Three sons came of the marriage, John being the youngest. Shortly after John was born, his father Gonzalo died, leaving Catalina to patch a life together as best she could for herself and her three young children. She moved from place to place plying her trade, eventually settling in the city of Medina del Campo. From his childhood on, John knew well what it meant to be poor, to go hungry and be poorly clothed, and to face the future without financial security. The experience did not make him bitter, but it gave him a deep compassion for the poor and suffering. It also toughened him; his later endurance of bodily austerities was learned in a hard school from a young age.

Catalina found that she could not support all her children; at the age of ten, John was boarded out at an orphanage, the Colegio de la Doctrina. John was an intelligent youth, deeply reserved, ardent but silent. During his teens he supported himself by working as a nurse in a large hospital, where he developed another quality that lasted to the end of his life: a ready sympathy for the sick. At the age of seventeen he attended the newly founded Jesuit College in Medina, where he remained for four years. At twenty-one he took the Carmelite habit under the name John of St. Matthew. He then spent three years at the University of Salamanca; at age twenty-five he was ordained a priest. It can be seen that John benefited from the new reforms that were making their way in the Church. He was given an excellent education by the Jesuits in the Christian humanist tradition, augmented at

Salamanca under the influence of the humanist scholar Francisco de Vitoria, an education that emphasized firm knowledge of the Scriptures and the study of the Church Fathers. Salamanca was also home to a revival of the theology of Thomas Aquinas. These various influences - familiarity with the Scriptures, knowledge of the Fathers, appreciation of Thomas's theology, all brought into harmony in an atmosphere of prayer and sacrament—were evident in John's later work, along with a more humble delight in vernacular love songs learned among the weavers of his youth.

Unlike Teresa of Avila, John was almost never autobiographical in his writings, so we have little detail concerning his early life. But it seems that he had settled on a vocation to the priesthood and to the contemplative life very early. He had always been a devout youth, and already during his university days at Salamanca, when not attending lectures he would study for long hours at his desk in his bare cell, refusing to join his companions in recreation or light conversation. He spent a large part of every night in prayer and was beginning to practice a severe ascetic regimen: he fasted rigorously and would whip himself to the point of drawing blood.

In 1567, the year he was ordained a priest, John met Teresa. Five years previously, Teresa had founded the Discalced Convent of St. Joseph, and she was now looking for likely priests of the order who could effect the same kind of reform among the friars. John was feeling drawn to a life of contemplation and austerity deeper than the Carmelites then offered and was thinking of joining the Carthusians. Teresa convinced him to stay with the Carmelites and to help her initiate a reform among the male branch. Teresa wrote to her sisters, "Thanks be to God, daughters, I have found a friar and a half to start the Reform with." It was a remark with a vein of humor in it, because John might have seemed only half a friar. He was under five feet tall and slight in build. But he had the vivid intensity of a laser beam. "Though he is small of stature," Teresa wrote, "I believe he is great in the eyes of God.... There is not a friar but speaks well of him for he leads a life of great penitence, though he entered upon it so recently. But the Lord seems to be leading him by the hand." John's readiness to join the Discalced reform came with a characteristic condition: that he would not have to wait too long. As it happened, he did not have to wait long. He returned to Salamanca for one last year of study, and then in the fall of 1568 he went to Duruelo, where Teresa had secured a small dwelling. There he and one other friar began the first priory of the Discalced reform. He took the name John of the Cross.

During the next eight years, John was busy furthering the reform. Five of those years he spent as chaplain at the Convent of the Incarnation, where he was confessor to Teresa. This was the period of their closest collaboration. Teresa and John were not naturally sympathetic personalities. In addition to being twice his age, Teresa—that most human of saints—preferred a dash of charm and playful wit in those close to her, and John was quiet and very serious. But Teresa understood John's worth, and later insisted that she never had so good a spiritual director. "I have sometimes been vexed with him," she wrote, "but we have never seen the least imperfection in him."<sup>10</sup> For John, the time with Teresa was one of gaining experience in pastoring souls and of a deepening life of prayer. While he could not have been called Teresa's student, he gained much from her example and from her experience of mystical contemplation.

**Persecution:** The story of the Carmelite reform is a tangled one, fraught with the confusion of overlapping jurisdictions and bedeviled by human weakness and imprudence. But it follows a pattern important to understand for the reform of the Church. It seems a rule that the stiffest opposition to the work of God comes, not from the unbelieving world, but from elements within the Church. At first sight this can seem anomalous; but in the light of God's preferred manner of saving the world it makes more sense. "The Lord has chosen Zion," sings the psalmist, "he has desired it for his habitation: 'This is my resting place for ever'" (Ps 132:13-14).

Once God had initiated salvation history by gathering a people to himself who were to be salt and light to the world that people and their history emerged as the center of the world's narrative, the unique stage upon which the human drama would be enacted. First the Chosen People of Israel and then the Christian Church became by necessity the main theater of spiritual warfare. Jesus's most difficult opponents were not the general populace, but the Pharisees and the chief priests; Paul was far more concerned about false teachers than about pagan unbelievers; and down the centuries the fiercest battles that Christians have waged have been with other Church members, often involving bishops and members of religious orders. Efforts to renew the Church have been most strenuously opposed by factions within the Church itself. Teresa of Avila once alluded to this reality: "The way of true religion is so little used that friars or nuns who begin truly to follow their calling have more to fear from members of their own communities than from all the devils." For reform to take root there is always a need for the endurance of Christ-like suffering by some of the Church's members at the hands of others within the Christian community. John of the Cross seemed set apart for just this purpose; he exemplifies what it means to be offered with Christ as a sacrificial victim for the renewal of the Church.

The storm that was gathering against the Discalced reform intensified in 1576 when Juan Bautista Rubeo, the same Carmelite general who had so warmly encouraged Teresa to make new foundations, suddenly turned against the reform and sought to end the growth and even the existence of Discalced friaries and convents, fearing that the reform was introducing deep divisions into the Carmelite order. This began a serious conflict, as the Carmelite general and his representatives took measures to curtail or to end the Discalced reform, while the papal nuncio, backed by the King of Spain, continued to support it. The struggle led to Teresa's "house arrest" at the Convent of the Incarnation. A decisive moment in the conflict came when the papal nuncio, a certain Nicolo Ormaneto who had been Charles Borromeo's vicar-general in Milan and an unfailing friend to the reform, died, and a new nuncio, Filippo Sega, who was dead set against reform, was appointed. Sega had once referred to Teresa as "a restless gad-about, a disobedient and contumacious woman." With Ormaneto's protection removed, the opponents of the Discalced reform grew bolder. Among various measures taken, they determined to act against John of the Cross, one of the first of the Discalced friars.

John had been living in a hermitage in Avila with another Discalced friar in his capacity as confessor at the Convent of the Incarnation. He was now commanded by Carmelite authorities to return to his original monastery and to stop following the Discalced constitutions. Upon resisting this move, John and his friar companion were apprehended by a posse of Carmelite monks and armed men and were spirited away - where, no one knew. John was taken first to the priory in Avila, where he was flogged. He was then taken by unfrequented roads in the middle of the night, blindfolded so he would not know where he was going, to the priory at Toledo. There he was brought before a tribunal and accused of insubordination for not obeying the order to leave his post as confessor at Avila and for insisting on living according to the Discalced reform. He was told that if he submitted to the ruling of the tribunal, his offense would be overlooked, and he would be given a high office in the Carmelite order. Nonetheless, John remained firm, saying that he had no authority to leave his post since it had been assigned to him by the papal representative, and he had taken a vow to follow the Discalced constitutions - a vow that he was not free to break. The tribunal found him guilty of rebellion and contumacy, and he was condemned to imprisonment for as long as the general of the order might determine. As soon as John had disappeared, Teresa had written to King Philip and to whatever influential bishops she knew, registering her anxiety about his situation. "I don't know how it is," she wrote, "that that saint is so unfortunate that no one remembers him."<sup>13</sup> But no one knew where

John was, and nothing could be done.

For two months John was held in the prison cell of the priory. But for fear that he might escape the cell, the friars found a more secure spot. They imprisoned John in a small room, six by ten feet that had previously been used as a closet. The room had a small slit high in the wall by which a little light could enter the cell. John could read his Office only by standing on a stool and holding his breviary above his head, and then only at the middle of the day. His bed was a board on the floor, covered by two old rugs. The room was freezing cold during the winter months when John was first captured. It then became swelteringly hot and stuffy as the summer months drew on. He was given no opportunity to wash and was allowed no change of clothing, and so was devoured by lice. His food consisted of a few scraps of bread and an occasional sardine, tossed on the floor of his cell. He soon contracted dysentery and grew afraid that the friars were attempting to poison him. John's bucket would purposely be left in his cell for days, creating such a stench that it made him vomit. His tunic, clotted with blood from beatings, began to putrefy, and worms bred in it. Never a person of vigorous health, this treatment over a period of many months made John weak and emaciated and brought him close to death.

On fast days John was brought to the refectory and made to kneel while the friars took their meal. An early biography based on firsthand accounts related the kind of admonishment given him by the prior of the house on these occasions:

If you wished to be good, what hindered you from remaining in an order that has produced so many friars who have been good and holy? But you, hypocrite, were not aiming at being a saint, but only at being thought one: not at the edification of the people but at the satisfaction of your own self-esteem. Look at him, brothers, this miserable, wretched little friar, scarcely good enough to be a convent porter! He seeks to reform others when what he needs is to reform himself. Now bare your shoulders: it is on them that we will write the rules of the new reform.

Then each of the friars would strike him in turn with a cane. John bore the punishment in silence, which seemed only to aggravate his persecutors the more. During this time of imprisonment John was held in solitary confinement. He was allowed to speak to no one; the one person he regularly saw, the friar who served as his jailor, treated him with contempt. The friars would sometimes converse outside his room with the purpose of allowing him to overhear their talk. They would say to one another that the prisoner would never be let out, and that all the Discalced monks and nuns had abandoned both him and the reform. All of this caused John great distress of mind.

After six months of this treatment, John experienced a slight relief. A younger friar from a different priory became his jailor, and he treated his prisoner with more compassion. The new jailor found John a clean tunic and gave him a needle and thread with which to mend his habit. He provided him with pen and ink for writing, and an oil lamp by which he could read his Office. He would sometimes leave the door of the cell open to let in a bit of light and air. During these times John was able to get out of his cell and to better ascertain his whereabouts in the monastery.

For nine months John was made to endure this crucifixion of suffering and isolation. He came to think that he would never get out of his cell alive. Then, according to one account, he received a vision from the Virgin Mary telling him that he was soon to escape his time of imprisonment. Emboldened by the vision, he decided to make the attempt. The Carmelite priory was built against the city wall. He calculated that there was a place from which he could escape over the wall if he cut up the rugs in his cell and tied the strands together to make a long rope. On the night of August 14, the eve of the Feast of the Assumption, John made his rope and, having earlier loosened the screws of the prison door, opened his cell and slipped out past two sleeping friars. By the light of a full moon he tied his rope to a railing and slid down, jumping the remaining ten feet. He then found himself trapped in the enclosure of a Franciscan convent; but he found a place where the plaster had broken loose and so was able to climb the wall and get into the street. He was now lost in a city he did not know in the middle of the night. He took shelter in a house until morning, and then asked the way to the Discalced convent. He found it, rang the bell, and spoke to the extern sister. It was the first anyone had heard of him for almost a year.

Upon his arrival at the convent, John was so thin and sickly that he seemed an image of death. He could speak only in a whisper and could hardly stand. The nuns, knowing the danger he was in, took him inside their enclosure. When the friars at the Carmelite priory discovered his escape, as they soon did, they went ranging through the city looking for him. They came to the Discalced convent and searched the grounds, but they did not dare to enter the enclosure. The nuns were soon able to get John into the hands of a wealthy nobleman, a friend to the reform, who gave him protection and a place to recuperate.

John's indomitable spirit can be seen in his response to his new freedom. Among the first things he did upon entering the Discalced convent was to read to the sisters the poems he had written during his imprisonment. It is an astonishing scene: a scarecrow of a man, at death's door, famished, filthy, beaten to a pulp, and starved

of human companionship, does not ask for food or drink or a safe haven. Instead he only wants to speak of the goodness and beauty of God; his keenest desire is to share his love for the One who came to him in the darkness, who revealed himself most clearly and alluringly in the midst of crucifixion.

**John's Mystical Writings:** After his escape from prison, John made his way to the south of Spain, to the friary of El Calvario. A short time later, once his health had been more or less restored, he was elected prior of the house. Nearby was a convent of Discalced nuns under the direction of one of the strongest personalities among Teresa's spiritual daughters, Ana de Jesus. Ana was on the lookout for a confessor for her sisters, and like many who encountered John, she was not at first impressed. She wrote to Teresa for advice on how to find a suitable priest for the position. Teresa wrote back: "It has really amused me, daughter, to see you complaining with so little reason when you have with you my Father Fray Juan de la Cruz, that divine and heavenly man. I assure you, my daughter, that since he left these parts I have not found another like him in the whole of Castile, nor one who inspires souls with such fervor on their journey to heaven."<sup>15</sup> Ana took Teresa's advice and enlisted John as confessor. It was a happy decision, since it was in caring for the nuns at this convent of Beas and explaining to them the principles of contemplative prayer that John wrote the best known of his prose works, *The Ascent of Mount Carmel and The Dark Night of the Soul*.

John's teaching on the mystical life can be best understood as the outworking of a passionate relationship of love. When he tried to communicate the sources of his spiritual vision, he could only express his ideas fully in love poetry modeled on the biblical Song of Songs. Even in his prose works he began with poetry; the whole of his lengthy volumes are extensive explanations of what the poetry means. Yet there is nothing sappy or sentimental in John's way of love. The road he mapped out could be intimidating in its relentless determination to allow nothing to get in the way of that highest of loves. "Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm; for love is strong as death, jealousy is cruel as the grave. Its flashes are flashes of fire, a most vehement flame" (Sg 8:6). These verses point to the kind of love one meets in the writings of John: a love as strong as death, a flame of consuming fire, a jealousy that will brook no rival. Yet John himself was a very gentle soul, and he handled his spiritual charges with great sensitivity. "The holier a man is," he once wrote, "the gentler he is and the less scandalized by the faults of others, because he knows the weak condition of man."

One of John's most potent images for describing the purifying effects of God's love was his extended comparison of the soul with a log of wood in a hot fire.

Fire, when applied to wood, first dehumidifies it, dispelling all moisture and making it give off any water it contains. Then it gradually turns the wood black, makes it dark and ugly, and even causes it to emit a bad odor. By drying out the wood, the fire brings to light and expels all those ugly and dark accidents which are contrary to fire. Finally, by heating and enkindling it from without, the fire transforms the wood into itself and makes it as beautiful as it is itself.

According to John, a similar process occurred when the fire of divine love began to enkindle the soul. Before transforming the soul, [divine love] purges it of all contrary qualities. It produces blackness and darkness and brings to the fore the soul's ugliness; thus the soul seems worse than before and unsightly and abominable. This divine purge stirs up all the foul and vicious humors of which the soul was never before aware; never did it realize there was so much evil in itself, since these humors were so deeply rooted.

This experience of purification could be very painful; it was an aspect of what John called the "dark night." But the point of the purgation was to allow the fullness of divine love to take full possession of the soul. This was why John called this night not only dark, but also "more desirable than the dawn." John then went on to describe the effects of the dark night: "God makes the soul die to all that He is not, so that when it is stripped and flayed of its old skin, He may clothe it anew. Its youth is renewed like the eagle's, clothed in the new man. This renovation is an illumination of the human intellect with supernatural light so that it becomes divine, united with the divine; an informing of the will with love of God so that it is no longer less than divine and loves in no other way than divinely, united and made one with the divine will and love. And thus this soul will be a soul of heaven, more divine than human."

This possibility of becoming a "partaker of the divine nature" (2 Pt 1:4) was the dizzyingly high vision that had captured John of the Cross, and upon which he focused the whole of his formidable energy of mind and soul. Something of that vision is caught in John's poem, "*A Quarry of Love*": Bent on an enterprise of love, And not in lack of hope, I flew so high, so high above I caught my quarry on the wing. As I rose to the higher reaches, Dazzled, blinded was my vision, And in an utter darkness won The hardest of my victories; I took a blind, unknowing plunge Because the venture was for love, And went so high, so high above I caught my quarry on the wing.

**John's Last Days:** The last days of John of the Cross were in keeping with the cruciform shape of his life. John seldom reported anything of his own mystical

experiences; but once he related to his brother an encounter with Christ. One evening as he was praying before the cross, Christ had spoken to him, saying: "Fray Juan, ask what favor you will of me and I will grant it in return for the services you have done me." To this John replied: "Lord make me to suffer and be despised for your sake." John's prayer of love for his crucified Lord was heard and answered.

By 1588 the Discalced reform had gained a measure of independence, and its existence and growth were now secured. Teresa had gone to her reward, and John had continued the work of founding new houses and of acting as a beloved prior and spiritual director to many in the reform. The new Discalced congregation now elected Nicolas Doria, of the powerful Genoese family, as its first vicar-general. Doria was a strong personality who came to his post with many innovations in mind, including a desire to centralize the government of the Discalced congregations. When John spoke up for what many considered the essence of the Discalced reform as it had been pioneered by Teresa, he ran afoul of the new vicar-general, who determined to marginalize him and if possible to disgrace him.

In 1591 John was stripped of whatever responsibilities he had held and was sent to an isolated and distant friary at a place called La Penuela. When some among his brothers urged him to lodge protests against this unfair treatment, he refused to defend himself. While at La Penuela he soon caught a fever, and he died even as his enemies were gathering libelous testimonies against him, hoping to report him to the Inquisition. He was not yet fifty years old. Moved by love to the last, on his deathbed John asked one of his Carmelite brothers to read him verses out of the Song of Songs. The time had come for the exile to go home; the day had arrived for the eager lover to embrace in its fullness what he had so ardently desired and so zealously pursued through the course of his life.

*Entrddose ha la Esposa*

*En el ameno huerto deseado,*

*Y asu sabor reposa*

*El cuello reclinado sobre los dulces brazos del Amado.*

She has entered in, the Bride, To the long desired and pleasant garden, And at her ease she lies, Her neck reclined To rest upon the Loved One's gentle arms. (from "Spiritual Canticle")