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SAINT JOHN OF THE CROSS, CONFESSOR, DOCTOR OF THE CHURCH



... the culmination of every Christian life

A Biography of St. John of the Cross

The culmination of every Christian life is the attainment of holiness.

Sanctity, I think, is often so compelling that we are loath to subject it to any association with error. We are inclined, in effect, to extrapolate from sanctity to inerrancy, as though a defect in the latter vitiates the former, which is not at all the case. Christ's stinging rebuke to Peter is a sober reminder of this. ¹ But the fact remains that it is likely in some to attenuate the genuine and unsparing critical impulse necessary to the objective analysis of a Saint's

work – and as a consequence to forfeit truth; a defection no less antagonistic to good philosophy than to religion. Truth itself, it has been suggested, must be esteemed as holy – and any defection from it a defection from the very holiness toward which we strive. And this is simply another way of saying that we cannot hope to attain to a consistent end through inconsistent means. And while we must be careful of a susceptibility to this type of critical latitude in dealing with the Saints, we must, on the other hand, and quite obviously, recognize that sanctity and critical acumen, while not allied of necessity, have quite often found common ground in the lives of the Saints. Even the most cursory perusal of the voluminous *Patrologiae Latinae Cursus Completus* or the *Patrologiae Graecae* – to mention nothing of the great multiplicity of philosophical and theological works within the Church that extends to the present day – clearly attests to this. And this is simply to say, on the other hand, that sanctity no more precludes critical acumen that critical insight precludes sanctity.

Nevertheless, it remains a common, even a persistent misconception that a Saint's commitment to doctrine – which, from the Catholic perspective, is at least an integral aspect of the imputation of sanctity – precludes, or at least impedes, hampers, confines, even compromises the disinterested dedication to truth. But the fact of the matter is that the sanctions incorporated into that very body of doctrine are more far-reaching, and far more stringent, relative to a commitment to truth than those which are selectively and subjectively appropriated outside of it according to the individual inclination of the skeptic. This is not to disparage the moral integrity of the skeptic, but merely to place it within existential perspective. The historical and often heroic commitment to truth on the part of many Catholic philosophers is, I suggest, exemplified in a way seldom encountered by their skeptical counterparts in a given culture – whether we consider the ancient martyrology beginning with the early Christian philosopher St. Justin Martyr who, rather than equivocate the truth, was scourged and beheaded in 165 AD; or in our own times, and within the great Carmelite tradition itself, in the case of St. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, who as Edith Stein, the German philosopher and colleague of the twentieth century phenomenologist Husserl, perished at the Nazi death camp at Auschwitz in 1942, both as a Jew and a Nun, renouncing neither and suffering for both – despised by the Nazis as a Jew and forsaken by her family as a Catholic Nun. Both, I maintain, are paradigms in the sense that each had clear existential alternatives, the extreme consequences of which turned exclusively upon their uncompromising relation to truth. These, and the many examples to which we can appeal, evidence a commitment to truth often supremely enacted; and that commitment, I suggest, which does not blench before the prospect of death is much less likely to be compromised in matters decidedly less final in nature.

Of course, such commitment can be, and frequently is, dismissed, or worse yet, trivialized as 'fanaticism', but I think, by and large, that this explanation is much too convenient, for we invariably see little of this trait, and much more in the way of balanced reason evidenced in the lives of the Saints. We are all familiar with one account or another in which the personality, or more specifically, perceived defects in the personality, are held to be explanatory of the doctrine. Interpreted psychologically in terms of a symptomatic, rather than philosophically in terms of its intrinsic coherence, the focus shifts altogether from philosophy (the doctrine as logical) to pathology (the doctrine as pathological). At times this would appear to be explanatory of at least some aspects of a given doctrine – but seldom the entire doctrine. Nietzsche, I think stands as one example of this, and so does Schopenhauer. But one will be hard pressed to detail this type of psychological association between St. John of the Cross and his doctrine; in effect, to see his doctrine emerging from his personality, and not out of his experiences. Those who would seek such an explanatory are bound to be disappointed in the life of St. John.

Beginnings

Born Juan de Yepes y Alvarez on what is likely the 24th of June 1542 in Fontiveros, Spain, St. John of the Cross was the youngest of three sons born to Gonzalo de Yepes and Catalina Alvarez. John's father, from a proud Toledo family which had accumulated some considerable wealth, had a bright future before him in the silk trade from which the family fortune had been amassed, but his marriage to Catalina, who was of humble origin, was considered by his family an unpardonable misalliance, and Gonzalo was effectively disowned and subsequently disinherited by his family, leaving Gonzalo with his wife and three children in great hardship. The callous disregard of Gonzalo and his family, now reduced to poverty, is stunning, especially in light of the untimely death of Gonzalo in 1543, two short years after the birth of John, subsequent to which the family turned a resolutely deaf ear to the pleas of the now destitute widow on behalf of her small children, one of whom, the second eldest, died within a few years of Gonzalo, leaving Catalina with John and his eldest brother Francisco. The poverty that John was later to embrace as a religious, was cruelly thrust upon him in childhood. Catalina's meager earnings from silk - weaving were not enough to feed and clothe her children who in large measure, and out of necessity, relied upon the beneficence of a catechetical orphanage in Medina del Campo to provide not simply the education, but the substance as well necessary to her children. During this period, John had acquired some instruction, but no great proficiency, in several trades with an eye toward some practical vocation, but it was really in his youthful office as acolyte at the Convent of Augustinian Nuns, where he served in the sacristy each morning, and not infrequently elsewhere among other duties in the afternoon, that John's lifelong love of the Church very likely began. The often long and solitary hours spent in obligations within the sacristy undoubtedly imbued the young John with a keen sense of the sacred and an early formative acquaintance with an atmosphere of introspective contemplation.

The Divine Summons

At sixteen, and now working at the nearby Plague Hospital de la Concepcion, he had matriculated at the Jesuit College at Medino del Campo where after four years of a liberal arts education, he entered the Novitiate of the Carmelite Order in 1563 and, as was the custom, assumed a new name, that of Juan de Santo Matia, or John of St. Matthias. Upon professing solemn vows he undertook further study at the Carmelite College at San Andrés which, rather auspiciously, was located at Salamanca. Here Fray John had the opportunity to study under some of the finest minds of late medieval Europe at the great University of Salamanca whose reputation as a center of learning equaled, and in some respects surpassed, the renowned medieval Universities of Paris and Oxford. Both at the College of San Andrés and at the University of Salamanca, John had acquired an apparently outstanding grasp of both Scholastic philosophy and theology, and in general excelled in his studies to such a remarkable extent that, while yet a student, he was appointed to the post of Prefect of Studies at San Andrés. In 1567 Fray Juan de la Cruz took Holy Orders and entered the priesthood. On the auspicious occasion of the celebration of his first Mass, which brought him to back his hometown of Medina del Campo, he met Madre Teresa de Jesus – better known as St. Teresa of Avila.

This acquaintance – not entirely fortuitous, for St. Teresa had sought out the young priest who had been recommended to her as a likely candidate to assist her in her efforts to reform the Carmelite Order at large, friars as well as nuns – evolved into a lifelong friendship and alliance, and was to prove momentous to both the 52 year old Carmelite Nun, and the young 25 year old priest whose deepening spirituality and strong sense of interiority had compelled him at this point

to consider transferring from the Carmelites to the more austere and reclusive Carthusians. But St. Teresa in short order succeeded in persuading the diminutive but intense young friar that his vocation lay in the white mantle that presently stood upon his shoulders, and not elsewhere; the Order of Our Lady, she insisted, must not be abandoned, but reformed. And she had quite definite plans for effecting the reform which the Mitigated Rule stood in such desperate need of, and John would be instrumental in restoring the venerable Order to its Primitive Rule among the friars in the way that St. Teresa had tirelessly labored to effect it among her nuns at Valladolid. In 1568, in the company of three other Carmelite friars, St. John changed his name at Duruelo from Juan de Santo Matia to Juan de la Cruz – and effectively entered upon the reform of the Order. The mutual vision and reciprocal commitment, coupled with the deep and holy affection that bound the younger John to the older Teresa, would sustain this collaborative effort for many years and through much hardship.

It was not long before the exemplary lives of the small community of reformed friars and nuns that had gathered around St. John and St. Teresa respectively began attracting vocations, and with the burgeoning reform, in which St. Teresa had been indefatigable, it was inevitable that the friars and nuns of the Mitigated Rule who wished to retain the individual latitude to which they had grown accustomed should respond sometimes acrimoniously, even violently, to the vigorous threat which the zeal of the reform had posed. From a larger perspective, however, the ensuing turmoil – and it was considerable – cannot be laid entirely at the feet of St. Teresa and St. John, though neither were loath to come to terms with the consequences of their zeal, for the call to a general reform of all Religious Orders had been issued by the Council of Trent a year earlier in 1568, and was already in the process of being implemented by King Philip II in that same year – a reform, we must remember, itself precipitated by the Counter-Reformation which had begun a mere 8 years earlier in 1560 under the Papacy of Pius IV.

Reformatio in Capite et in Membris: The Counter-Reformation

Some brief overview of this period is necessary, I think, to understanding the historical context from which the reform efforts of both Saints took their impetus. The lax and reproachable state of affairs, especially concerning discipline and morals, into which highly profiled segments of the Church had fallen, had, of course, precipitated the Reformation some years earlier, and what had been experienced by the Church on a much larger scale had no less been the occasion of the lapse in discipline in the religious orders in Spain as well. The formation and training of the clergy at large had been seriously neglected in favor of the decidedly more immediate and provincial interests of higher ecclesiastical dignitaries and this regrettable state of affairs was often not unaccompanied by moral turpitude. Members of the Papal Curia, no less than local bishops and abbots, had come to understand and so exercise their authority in increasingly secular terms, to the neglect and detriment of the primary spiritual offices with which they were entrusted; offices which, at least as often as not, were as instrumental to augmenting their income as to their acquiring the perquisites of secular power. Entire cathedral chapters, whose ecclesiastics were beneficed through endowments established to maintain the clergy, would often spuriously combine prebends – salaries intended to be distributed among the clergy attached to the Cathedral – within one individual, increasing his leverage in both power and wealth. And conditions, regrettably, fared no better with the Religious Orders themselves. Not infrequently, monasteries of religious women were largely congregations of the unmarried daughters of the nobility, and for many Orders, the original charism upon which the community had been founded, and which had provided its *raison d'être*, had been entirely lost in this lapse of orientation, or the rule so seriously mitigated as to be

unrecognizable.

A recognition of the impotence of this sorry state of affairs had existed for some time and in fact dated at least as far back as the 14th century where the call *pro reformatio in capite et in membris*² had begun slowly gathering the initial momentum that would culminate in the Counter-Reformation in 1560. St. John and St. Teresa, while confining their efforts at reform to the Carmelite order in particular, may in fact be seen not simply as the product of the Counter-Reformation, but as two of the most brilliant, articulate, energetic and successful figures that the Counter-Reformation had produced. The influence of their efforts extended well beyond the cloisters of Carmel; indeed, well beyond the border of Spain and continues to exert itself to the present day within the whole of Catholicism at large. In any event, the reform which the two Saints had collaborated in effecting resulted in some particularly bitter consequences for St. John who, taken captive by the Calced Carmelites – the friars of the mitigated rule, who, unlike the newly reformed Discalced Carmelites, wore sandals, the latter going barefooted, or discalced – and refusing to renounce the reform, was subsequently imprisoned at the Carmelite Priory in Toledo in 1577 for the better part of a year.

The room – a closet actually – that served as his cell, was a meager 6 foot by 10 foot area, unheated, unventilated, and effectively unilluminated except for a small crevice in one wall well above the head of the spare and diminutive friar who, standing erectly, barely attained to five feet. Subsisting only on bread and water and an occasional sardine, he was routinely scourged, not by one, but by every present member of the Calced community following their evening refectio and returned to the darkness and cold – or stifling heat – of his cell. Having nothing but the tattered clothes on his wounded and unhealing back, no breviary, and probably most painfully, nothing with which to confect the species through which he could celebrate Mass, St. John was left with the outer darkness – and the gathering inner light, a combination which crystallized in the sublime poetry that has made the works of St. John of the Cross not just classic in Spanish literature, but among the most beautiful poetic works ever written.

Chronology of St. John's Writings

After six months closely confined and in great privation, St. John was providentially assigned a new jailer, Fray Juan de Santa Maria, who was much more kindly disposed toward the gentle St. John than his previous incarcerator. He appears to have allowed him oil and a lamp, and more importantly, paper and ink upon which to write, and in general seems to have made every effort to alleviate the condition of the straitened friar as much as was within his power to do so, despite the severe sanctions, under provisions of the Order's constitution, that would have been applied against him, and with the same severity and exactitude with which St. John himself had become intimately acquainted. At this time, St. John composed the first thirty-one verses of his magnificent Spiritual Canticle, and several less well-known poems. Two months later, in August of 1578, and under circumstances deemed by some to have been miraculous, St. John managed to escape his captors and found refuge in Toledo with the reformed Carmelite nuns who sheltered him from his pursuers, bringing him south to the greater safety of El Calvario in Andalusia where he began composing the Dark Night of the Soul and the Ascent of Mount Carmel upon which he worked sporadically until their completion in 1585.

St. John's poetry, the magnificent and inimitable style of which contrasts so sharply with his dense and often redundant literary treatises, is widely considered among the most beautiful and

preeminent in all of Spanish literature to date. In fact, it is among the most beautiful, most evocative of poetic literature in any language. As Fr. Kieran Kavanaugh, O.C.D. correctly observes,

“St. John of the Cross has received the title, “the loftiest poet of Spain”, not on account of his books of poetry, but with some ten or twelve compositions. These compositions, however, display such variety that it can almost be affirmed that each of them represents a completely distinct poetic vision and technique, a singular accomplishment in Spanish literature.”³

There are ten poems of indubitable authenticity, all composed within a 14 year period preceding St. John’s death in 1591. Regrettably, none of the original copies are extant. The copies which do exist are incorporated into what is known as the Codex of Sanlucar, which, while not in the hand of the Saint himself, were nevertheless unquestionably reviewed and revised by St. John as attested to by glosses and additions to the text which appear in the handwriting of St. John. The authenticity of four other poems is also very likely. It is, I find, an extreme irony – even a paradox – that one is more likely to arrive at a much clearer intuition (not understanding) of something verging upon the experience of *unio mystica* through any of these 14 poems, than through all the protracted, carefully nuanced, and often involuted explications which St. John offers us through the treatises we have examined in this work. Here we have attained to consistency. In his poetry we attain to sublimity. The poems of unquestionable authenticity are as follows:

- **The Spiritual Canticle (Cantico Espiritual)**
- **The Dark Night (Noche Oscura)**
- **The Living Flame of Love (Llama De Amor Via)**
- **I Entered in Unknowing (Yo No Supe Dónde Entraba)**
- **I Live, but Not in Myself (Vivo sin Vivir en Mi)**
- **I Went Out Seeking Love (Tras de un Amoroso Lance)**
- **A Lone Young Shepherd (Un Pastorcico Solo Esta Penado)**
- **For I Know Well the Spring (Que Bien Sé Yo la Fuente)**
- **The Romances (Romances 1-9)**
- **On the Psalm: “By the Waters of Babylon” (Romance Que Va Por “Super flumina Babylonis” (Ps. 136)**

The remaining four poems, the authenticity of which cannot be definitively established but which very likely were composed by St. John are:

- **Without Support and With Support (Sin Arrimo y con Arrimo)**
- **Not for All of Beauty (Por Toda la Hermosura)**

· **Del Verbo Divino (Del Verbo Divino)**

· **The Sum of Perfection (Suma De Perfeccion)**

These poems are faithfully reproduced in Spanish and meticulously translated into English by Fr. Kieran Kavanaugh O.C.D. and Fr. Otilio Rodriguez, O.C.D. in "The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross"⁴, which I highly recommend.

Death and Canonization

St. John, in the years ensuing, was extremely active within the newly reformed order, holding a variety of positions as confessor, vicar, Prior, Second Definitor, Vicar- Provincial, Definitor and Consiliario, and Deputy-Vicar General – to say nothing of the great administrative skill he demonstrated as founder and rector of the Carmelite College for the students of the Reform at Baeza. This activity, however, was balanced by the contemplation he had patiently and diligently acquired through spending long hours in prayer. As is often the case with great saints no less than great men, the end of his life would find him persecuted by the very cause for which he gave of himself entirely, patiently enduring the spite of lesser men resentful of his irrepressible sanctity.

Deprived, for his conviction, of every office within the Reform, and in failing health, he repaired to La Peñuela in 1591 only to learn that efforts were already under way to expel the holy friar from the Reform itself which he had founded, and for whose sake he had willingly suffered so much. This must have been a bitter disappointment to St. John – not to find himself despised and put to naught; indeed, it was his wish to die alone, without title, and in obscurity – but to find his brothers in Christ at such a great distance from the heart of God, the mind of Christ, in their enmity not just to him – but to any man.

It has indeed been well put that in the Church where the lights are brightest, the shadows are also deepest. St. Teresa, who had died some nine years earlier in 1582 would probably have come closest to understanding the heart of St. John at this crucial and final point in his life, but was providentially spared the pain of this ignominy. John, whose health continued to decline, and still under the vow of obedience, was ordered to seek medical assistance which was available both at Baeza and Ubeda, and when presented with the choice opted for Ubeda where, he felt, he was unknown and would be accorded no more consideration than any other friar in failing health. But even in Ubeda, St. John's reputation preceded him, and despite his ill health, those both envious and suspicious of his sanctity received him coldly, brusquely assigning him the poorest cell available while taking pains to make clear to him the inconvenience and expense incurred of necessity by his stay at the monastery. This must have troubled St. John as much as the festering ulcerations that had by now progressed from his legs to his back, and before long it became apparent that the small friar in the most dismal cell was dying. Without reproach, and in the most earnest humility, he begged pardon of those to whom he had become such an unwelcome burden, and parting his lips finally, uttered the words of Christ on the Cross: "Lord, into your hands I commend my spirit", and with this, died. He was forty-nine. Within eighty-four years of his death on December 14, 1591 St. John of the Cross was beatified by Pope Clement X on January 25, 1675, subsequently canonized by Pope Benedict XIII on December 26, 1726, and finally declared a Doctor of the Church Universal by Pope Pius XI on August 24, 1926.

Something more must be said of this great luminary, something vitally important to any adequate assessment of the life of St. John. And it may be summed up simply in this: St. John was a good man. For all the austerity to which he subjected himself willingly and without murmur, his heart was singularly inaustrere. Embracing poverty, and the son of poverty from his earliest childhood, he was nevertheless pained by the poverty he saw in others, even in the sometimes desperately poor nuns of the Reformed and Primitive Rule for whom he himself would beg alms as a father for his children. Knowing the needs of others, he never humiliated those in want, but anticipating their need, set about to secure what was necessary for them, knowing that they would never ask it for themselves. His concern, it is important to note, did not extend simply to the spiritual welfare of those with whom he came in contact: he saw the whole man, the entire woman, not just the *imago Dei* sequestered behind the ephemerality of the flesh, but the Sacred Humanity of Christ which ennobled the humanity of every person.

His eyes, St. Teresa tells us, were large and dark, and in St. John they were not merely the portals to his own soul, but the lamps of compassion that burned with a love that seemed to embrace the totality of the person who stood before him. The hunger that gnawed at the stomachs of his penitents was just as real as the cancer of sin he sought to excise from their souls in the holy tribunal of penance. The illness that racked the bodies of men and women was every bit as real as the spiritual sickness that plagued their souls, and he sought to remedy both as much as it was in his power to do so. His life, in short, was conformed to the life of Christ who not simply forgave sins, but healed the sinner, and who, in the succinct words of the Apostle Peter, went about doing good.⁵ St. John, in a word, was the faithful steward whose will was to do the will of the Master. And these who gathered around him, Carmelite and lay, would in the end be called home through the same night to the same House by the same Father, in the one same unquenchable light that, consuming all else in a holocaust of love, ultimately reveals the face of God.

1 Mk. 8.33

2 literally, a reform of the head and the members.

3 The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross, p.709, Kieran Kavanaugh, O.C.D. and Otilio Rodriguez, O.C.D., ICS Publications, Institute of Carmelite Studies, Washington, D.C., 1979

4 op. cit.

5 Acts 10.38

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