

St. John of the Cross  
By David Rose

It is a reality that when we read of the Christian saints, we often feel that they have some special channel to God that we do not. They are on a different level, more in contact with God. But how is this level achieved? Is there a guide book or directions that can help us? John of the Cross offers us some ideas that may help achieve that end.

Born *Juan de Yepes Alvarez* of a poor family of *conversos* (converted Jews) in 1542 in Avila, the death of his father caused his family to move frequently in search of a living until they at last settled in Medina del Campo when he was nine. While there he worked in the hospital and eventually studied humanities at the local Jesuit school from 1559 to 1563. In that year he entered the Carmelite order taking the name of Fr. *Juan de Santo Maria*.

In 1564, he moved to the Salamanca to continue his studies in theology and philosophy at the University. There he gained knowledge of the Bible, especially the Song of Songs which he read in a Spanish translation by Fr. *Luis de Leon*, a teacher there. (At this time in Spain, translations of any Biblical book into the common language was strictly forbidden.) The Song would be a strong influence on his religious thought.

At his graduation in 1567, he gave thought to joining a stricter order. But on a trip back home, he met the redoubtable Teresa of Avila who, sensing his sincerity, informed him of reforms which she wished to effect in the Carmelite order. Enlisted in this effort,

he and another friar began the reforms at a small town of Duruelo thereby putting it on the religious map.

For the next ten years he founded monasteries around Spain founded on the stricter rule formulated by Teresa. The reformed order referred to themselves as the “discalced” Carmelites, the term meaning “barefooted”. There was resistance by many Carmelite friars to this effort to return to the vows of poverty and asceticism which informed the original order. Those resisting would be referred to as the calced friars.

In December of 1577, John was taken prisoner by his calced superiors in an effort on their part to stop the reforms. This was in spite of the (higher) official approval of the Spanish Nuncio(Papal official). He was jailed in Toledo for nine months where he was publicly lashed once a week and confined to a small isolation cell. While there he composed his *Spiritual Canticle* and found the inspiration for his other poems written later.

He engineered his escape and returned to normal life, reforming and building new monasteries for the Discalced Carmelite order, enduring the harassment of the Calced Carmelites, until his death in on December 14 of 1591. He was canonized in 1726.

He was and is most remembered for his poetry, thought by some to be the best ever written in Spanish, and his spiritual classics, particularly the *Dark Night of the Soul* and *Ascent of Mount Carmel*.

The *Dark Night* and the *Ascent* are reflections on his poem *Dark Night of the Soul* which he wrote after his incarceration. Especially in the *Ascent*, for which he also drew a diagram or map, he outlines a stepped progression to achieve what he calls *nada* or nothing. This does not mean the negation of life or rejection of the material world in the usual sense but rather an

unloading of anything that impedes the growth of the soul toward union with God. He envisions this in the form of four nights: the active night of the sense, the active night of the spirit, the passive night of the sense and the passive night of the spirit. It is best for the seeker to read these in John's own words since the space is limited but we will address briefly the passive nights, since he expounded more completely on it in the second of his prose works, *The Dark Night of the Soul*.

This is the point that we often read of in the lives of the great saints where after emptying themselves of all impediments and experiencing God's presence, they gradually find themselves in a place where their prayers fall flat and they feel abandoned by God. Even the service of God brings no relief. It is at this point, the dark night of the soul or the passive night of the sense, in which the soul learns to walk by faith not by sight or feeling. John then explains and gives further direction to enable achievement of the final goal of union, the passive night of the spirit.

It is the measure of John's vision and compassion that he does not say that all souls must have these experiences. Some peoples' road might be simpler, more direct; others might have to endure the full brunt. But many have encountered this dark night, most recently Mother Teresa of India who, in her biography, revealed her fifty year struggle with it.

She and others have found the help they needed in the work of this insightful Spanish friar.