



The Holy See

BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

*Paul VI Audience Hall
Wednesday, 16 February 2011*

[\[Video\]](#)

Saint John of the Cross

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Two weeks ago I presented the figure of the great Spanish mystic, Teresa of Jesus. Today I would like to talk about another important saint of that country, a spiritual friend of St Teresa, the reformer, with her, of the Carmelite religious family: St John of the Cross. He was proclaimed a Doctor of the Church by [Pope Pius XI](#) in 1926 and is traditionally known as *Doctor mysticus*, “Mystical Doctor”.

John of the Cross was born in 1542 in the small village of Fontiveros, near Avila in Old Castille, to Gonzalo de Yepes and Catalina Alvarez. The family was very poor because his father, Gonzalo, from a noble family of Toledo, had been thrown out of his home and disowned for marrying Catalina, a humble silk weaver.

Having lost his father at a tender age, when John was nine he moved with his mother and his brother Francisco to Medina del Campo, not far from Valladolid, a commercial and cultural centre. Here he attended the *Colegio de los Doctrinos*, carrying out in addition several humble tasks for the sisters of the Church-Convent of the Maddalena. Later, given his human qualities and his academic results, he was admitted first as a male nurse to the Hospital of the Conception, then to the recently founded Jesuit College at Medina del Campo.

He entered the College at the age of 18 and studied the humanities, rhetoric and classical languages for three years. At the end of his formation he had a clear perception of his vocation: the religious life, and, among the many orders present in Medina, he felt called to Carmel.

In the summer of 1563 he began his novitiate with the Carmelites in the town, taking the religious name of Juan de Santo Matía. The following year he went to the prestigious University of Salamanca, where he studied the humanities and philosophy for three years.

He was ordained a priest in 1567 and returned to Medina del Campo to celebrate his first Mass surrounded by his family's love. It was precisely here that John and Teresa of Jesus first met. The meeting was crucial for them both. Teresa explained to him her plan for reforming Carmel, including the male branch of the Order, and suggested to John that he support it "for the greater glory of God". The young priest was so fascinated by Teresa's ideas that he became a great champion of her project.

For several months they worked together, sharing ideals and proposals aiming to inaugurate the first house of Discalced Carmelites as soon as possible. It was opened on 28 December 1568 at Duruelo in a remote part of the Province of Avila.

This first reformed male community consisted of John and three companions. In renewing their religious profession in accordance with the primitive Rule, each of the four took a new name: it was from this time that John called himself "of the Cross", as he came to be known subsequently throughout the world.

At the end of 1572, at St Teresa's request, he became confessor and vicar of the Monastery of the Incarnation in Avila where Teresa of Jesus was prioress. These were years of close collaboration and spiritual friendship which enriched both. The most important Teresian works and John's first writings date back to this period.

Promoting adherence to the Carmelite reform was far from easy and cost John acute suffering. The most traumatic episode occurred in 1577, when he was seized and imprisoned in the Carmelite Convent of the Ancient Observance in Toledo, following an unjust accusation. The Saint, imprisoned for months, was subjected to physical and moral deprivations and constrictions. Here, together with other poems, he composed the well-known *Spiritual Canticle*. Finally, in the night between 16 and 17 August 1578, he made a daring escape and sought shelter at the Monastery of Discalced Carmelite Nuns in the town. St Teresa and her reformed companions celebrated his liberation with great joy and, after spending a brief period recovering, John was assigned to Andalusia where he spent 10 years in various convents, especially in Granada.

He was charged with ever more important offices in his Order, until he became vicar provincial and completed the draft of his spiritual treatises. He then returned to his native land as a member of

the General Government of the Teresian religious family which already enjoyed full juridical autonomy.

He lived in the Carmel of Segovia, serving in the office of community superior. In 1591 he was relieved of all responsibility and assigned to the new religious Province of Mexico. While he was preparing for the long voyage with 10 companions he retired to a secluded convent near Jaén, where he fell seriously ill.

John faced great suffering with exemplary serenity and patience. He died in the night between 13 and 14 December 1591, while his confreres were reciting Matins. He took his leave of them saying: "Today I am going to sing the Office in Heaven". His mortal remains were translated to Segovia. He was beatified by Clement X in 1675 and canonized by Benedict XIII in 1726.

John is considered one of the most important lyric poets of Spanish literature. His major works are four: *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, *The Dark Night*, *The Spiritual Canticle* and *The Living Flame of Love*.

In *The Spiritual Canticle* St John presents the process of the soul's purification and that is the gradual, joyful possession of God, until the soul succeeds in feeling that it loves God with the same love with which it is loved by him. *The Living Flame of Love* continues in this perspective, describing in greater detail the state of the transforming union with God.

The example that John uses is always that of fire: just as the stronger the fire burns and consumes wood, the brighter it grows until it blazes into a flame, so the Holy Spirit, who purifies and "cleanses" the soul during the dark night, with time illuminates and warms it as though it were a flame. The life of the soul is a continuous celebration of the Holy Spirit which gives us a glimpse of the glory of union with God in eternity.

The Ascent of Mount Carmel presents the spiritual itinerary from the viewpoint of the gradual purification of the soul, necessary in order to scale the peaks of Christian perfection, symbolized by the summit of Mount Carmel. This purification is proposed as a journey the human being undertakes, collaborating with divine action, to free the soul from every attachment or affection contrary to God's will.

Purification which, if it is to attain the union of love with God must be total, begins by purifying the life of the senses and continues with the life obtained through the three theological virtues: faith, hope and charity, which purify the intention, the memory and the will.

The Dark Night describes the "passive" aspect, that is, God's intervention in this process of the soul's "purification". In fact human endeavour on its own is unable to reach the profound roots of the person's bad inclinations and habits: all it can do is to check them but cannot entirely uproot

them. This requires the special action of God which radically purifies the spirit and prepares it for the union of love with him.

St John describes this purification as “passive”, precisely because, although it is accepted by the soul, it is brought about by the mysterious action of the Holy Spirit who, like a burning flame, consumes every impurity. In this state the soul is subjected to every kind of trial, as if it were in a dark night.

This information on the Saint’s most important works help us to approach the salient points of his vast and profound mystical doctrine, whose purpose is to describe a sure way to attain holiness, the state of perfection to which God calls us all.

According to John of the Cross, all that exists, created by God, is good. Through creatures we may arrive at the discovery of the One who has left within them a trace of himself. Faith, in any case, is the one source given to the human being to know God as he is in himself, as the Triune God. All that God wished to communicate to man, he said in Jesus Christ, his Word made flesh. Jesus Christ is the only and definitive way to the Father (*cf.* Jn 14:6). Any created thing is nothing in comparison to God and is worth nothing outside him, consequently, to attain to the perfect love of God, every other love must be conformed in Christ to the divine love.

From this derives the insistence of St John of the Cross on the need for purification and inner self-emptying in order to be transformed into God, which is the one goal of perfection. This “purification” does not consist in the mere physical absence of things or of their use; on the contrary what makes the soul pure and free is the elimination of every disorderly dependence on things. All things should be placed in God as the centre and goal of life.

Of course, the long and difficult process of purification demands a personal effort, but the real protagonist is God: all that the human being can do is to “prepare” himself, to be open to divine action and not to set up obstacles to it. By living the theological virtues, human beings raise themselves and give value to their commitment. The growth of faith, hope and charity keeps pace with the work of purification and with the gradual union with God until they are transformed in him.

When it reaches this goal, the soul is immersed in Trinitarian life itself, so that St John affirms that it has reached the point of loving God with the same love with which he loves it, because he loves it in the Holy Spirit.

For this reason the Mystical Doctor maintains that there is no true union of love with God that does not culminate in Trinitarian union. In this supreme state the holy soul knows everything in God and no longer has to pass through creatures in order to reach him. The soul now feels bathed in divine love and rejoices in it without reserve.

Dear brothers and sisters, in the end the question is: does this Saint with his lofty mysticism, with this demanding journey towards the peak of perfection have anything to say to us, to the ordinary Christian who lives in the circumstances of our life today, or is he an example, a model for only a few elect souls who are truly able to undertake this journey of purification, of mystical asceticism?

To find the answer we must first of all bear in mind that the life of St John of the Cross did not “float on mystical clouds”; rather he had a very hard life, practical and concrete, both as a reformer of the Order, in which he came up against much opposition and from the Provincial Superior as well as in his confreres’ prison where he was exposed to unbelievable insults and physical abuse.

His life was hard yet it was precisely during the months he spent in prison that he wrote one of his most beautiful works. And so we can understand that the journey with Christ, travelling with Christ, “the Way”, is not an additional burden in our life, it is not something that would make our burden even heavier but something quite different. It is a light, a power that helps us to bear it.

If a person bears great love in himself, this love gives him wings, as it were, and he can face all life’s troubles more easily because he carries in himself this great light; this is faith: being loved by God and letting oneself be loved by God in Jesus Christ. Letting oneself be loved in this way is the light that helps us to bear our daily burden.

And holiness is not a very difficult action of ours but means exactly this “openness”: opening the windows of our soul to let in God’s light, without forgetting God because it is precisely in opening oneself to his light that one finds strength, one finds the joy of the redeemed.

Let us pray the Lord to help us discover this holiness, to let ourselves be loved by God who is our common vocation and the true redemption. Many thanks.

To special groups:

I extend a warm welcome to all the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors, especially those students from St Benedict’s School, St Aloysius College, St Patrick’s Grammar School, and students and parishioners from the United States. Upon you all, I invoke God’s Blessings of joy and peace.

I address a cordial welcome to the Italian-speaking pilgrims, In particular, I greet the participants in the General Chapter of the Marian Clerics of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary. I hope that they will continue generously their service to Christ and to the Church, following faithfully the path marked out by their venerable Founder. I greet with affection the Missionaries of Charity and thank them for their joyful Christian witness on the various continents, following in the footsteps of their unforgettable Foundress, Bl. Teresa of Calcutta. I greet the regional coordinators

of the Apostleship of the Sea, on the occasion of the Congress organized by the Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People and I encourage them to identify appropriate pastoral answers to the problems of people who work at sea and of their families.

Lastly my thoughts turn to the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newlyweds*. Dear *young people*, make room in your hearts for Jesus and spread his joy and his peace. Dear *sick people*, offer the Lord your moments of trial so that the doors of hearts may be opened to the Gospel promulgation. And you, dear *newlyweds*, always be witnesses to the love of Christ, who has called you to fulfil a common plan of life.

© Copyright 2011 - Libreria Editrice Vaticana

Copyright © Dicastero per la Comunicazione - Libreria Editrice Vaticana