Saints by Our Side

John of the Cross

George P. Evans

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Introduction

People feel more easily drawn toward some saints, for example Saint Francis, the poor, humble man of Assisi; or Saint Thérèse of Lisieux, the splendid Little Flower in God's garden. But they are less likely to feel drawn to someone who is named after the Cross. And even more so if that saint is someone described as "perhaps one of the most misquoted and misunderstood of all the writers in the Christian spiritual canon."[1]

Saint John of the Cross is such a saint. And while his name and writings might make him seem intimidating, he deserves to be better known. He was a Carmelite priest, a poet, a theologian, a trusted and prudent spiritual director, and a leader in his religious order. He became one of the world's foremost experts on the dynamics of making progress in faith, prayer, and love. Partly due to his very name, he tends to command respect for taking the Christian way of life seriously. However, other factors have led to

him being misunderstood: his depth of teaching, his mysterious poems, and his forthright dealing with the darker, harder side of following Christ. As the Carmelite scholar Kieran Kavanaugh has noted regarding John's writings: "[his] is a treasure difficult to mine."[2] John of the Cross is underappreciated as a model of how ordinary folks can follow Christ. Some have prejudged him as a forbidding over-achiever in the sanctity department or have presumed that they cannot relate to his story.

Early written portrayals of John by supporters of his cause for canonization stressed his unusual holiness and emphasized the extraordinary features of his life. They depicted him as so rigorous in his penances, unreachable in his theological ideas, and proficient in prayer that the average Christian could not hope to imitate him. His biographers underplayed what John holds in common with most spiritual wayfarers.

After being declared a Doctor of the Church in 1926, a new and more accessible image of John slowly emerged. The former view of John has not completely faded, but a new perspective on his life and gifts has helped bring him further into the mainstream of Christian spirituality.

Today his life deserves a fresh look. Those willing to get to know John will find that his depth and seriousness are matched by his joy and honesty. His life story, versatile gifts, and proven insights lead one into the riches that come from following Christ wholeheartedly. With John, Christian life is never static but always moves toward a more profound relationship with God. John wants us to know, love, and serve the God whose friendship he deeply prized. John stands out among the saints as one who meets people where they are and speaks from his own experience

of the beauty and messiness of life. We don't need to keep John on a pedestal; he can be, in the words of this series, one of the "saints by our side."

John let himself be surrounded by love, even when his life was difficult. The love he lived, taught, and offered was not fluffy or superficial, but the self-sacrificing, sometimes tough love he saw modeled and freely given by Jesus Christ, our Savior.

To celebrate the 400th anniversary of John's death, Saint John Paul II wrote *Master in the Faith*, a tribute to the witness John still offers the Church. In this document, the pope discusses the virtue of faith as understood by John of the Cross. Saint John Paul reminds us that John "speaks to the deepest aspirations of the human person" (no. 1) and calls John's writings "a treasure to be shared with all those who seek the face of God today" (no. 1).[3]

Saint John has been an ever more familiar companion of my life. In my childhood I remember John as one of the saints I read about in the book *Heavenly Friends: A Saint for Each Day*.[4] I was impressed with his story, but I didn't hold on to many details.

As a seminarian, I enrolled in a wonderful course that each week explored the teachings of an acclaimed Christian spiritual master. John and his friend Teresa of Ávila were included. I found the short introduction to John's life story intriguing but his teachings hard to understand. I wish I had known his life more fully before tackling his ideas.

A few years later, as I began studying for my doctorate in theology at The Catholic University of America, I participated in a fine seminar course that surveyed the major Christian spiritual masters. The course included three prominent Carmelite saints: Teresa, John, and Thérèse of Lisieux. That same year, the

university hosted a three-day symposium commemorating the 500th anniversary of Saint Teresa of Ávila's death. This event introduced me to research from leading scholars. I never forgot my pleasant exposure to Teresa and her friend John, and I have always retained my esteem for them.

Later, as a spiritual director on the faculty of Saint John's Seminary in Boston, I relied on some of Saint John's helpful insights. While many of my colleagues were versed in the contribution of Ignatius of Loyola and the Jesuit tradition, I investigated other strains of our Catholic spiritual legacy. Remembering the two great sixteenth-century Carmelite superstars, and less daunted by John's teachings than before, I developed a course, which I have often taught. It considers the life and teachings of Teresa, John, and their spiritual daughter Thérèse. I am glad to help people discover how all three saints speak so convincingly of the gift of God's love for each of us and of our reciprocal self-gift to God.

While many classic spiritual writers present particular elements of the Christian's spiritual quest, John is outstanding in his comprehensive description of spiritual development. Moreover, John is unsurpassed in his ability to deal with the tougher side of trying to live as a Christian. He addresses issues such as our own resistance to grace as well as our unhelpful attachments and challenges, in maturing into better ways of prayer, letting go of blocks to growth, and dealing with suffering. John's mastery of these matters makes him an exceptionally realistic spiritual guide. He knew the power of the paschal mystery: the death and resurrection of Christ. Evident in John's life and teaching, this paschal pattern has helped me to understand my own journey with God

and to accompany others on theirs. John has become a guide and one of my favorite "heavenly friends." And I am happy to introduce others to the life of this remarkable saint.

The saints lived in our world with their own hopes and worries, stories and struggles, temptations and talents, and they let God's love fill them. God's grace keeps flowing out through them to us. May John, God's friend and mine, become a friend to those who get to know him better. May meeting John through his personal story be a springboard to exploring his teachings.

Chapter One

A Tough Start in Life

Gonzalo de Yepes and Catalina Álvarez, the parents of the man now acclaimed as Saint John of the Cross, were a devoted but struggling Catholic couple in sixteenth-century Spain. Their roots were in the Toledo area, within the region of Castile. While virtually untouched by the upheaval of the Reformation that had rocked much of Europe, Spain had earlier experienced its own religious and cultural divisions. In the early eighth century, Arab Muslims conquered much of predominantly Christian Spain. After that, Christians, Muslims, and Jews lived together rather peacefully, albeit separately. A few centuries later, benefitting from disunity among the Muslims, separate Christian kingdoms emerged in northern and central Spain. They expanded southward and reasserted Catholicism. The last Muslim holdout was the region of Granada in Spain's far south,

but in 1492 the staunchly Catholic Spanish monarchs Ferdinand and Isabella conquered that area.

A century earlier, in 1391, a tragic persecution of Jews had erupted, and this caused many Jews to become Christians by force. Known as *conversos,* they often became successfully integrated into Spanish society. However, "old Catholics" harbored suspicion toward them. Under Ferdinand and Isabella, the many thousands of remaining Jews in Spain were ordered to convert to Catholicism by 1492 or face expulsion. Nationalistic fervor prevailed. Many practicing Jews chose to leave Spain, but many others stayed and converted. Likewise, the monarchs brought about the mass conversion of Muslims, who were called *moriscos*. Into and throughout the sixteenth century a widespread but largely unfounded suspicion grew that many of the converted Jews and Muslims were secretly maintaining their former religious practices. Many people focused on the prestige of having pure Spanish blood, which led them to disparage the *conversos* and *moriscos.*

Gonzalo de Yepes was a young man descended from a prominent line of silk merchants, but he had been an orphan. He worked as an administrative clerk and a cloth salesman in a business owned by his uncles. During his travels, Gonzalo met and fell in love with Catalina Álvarez, a poor weaver and also an orphan. She was boarding at a weaving shop in Fontiveros, a small town in Castile between Ávila and Salamanca. Their desire to marry sprang from a genuine love and not from any hopes of gaining property or wealth. Love emboldened Gonzalo to give up a potentially secure future in exchange for the unknown. In 1529, despite their different backgrounds, the two freely gave

themselves to each other in marriage. Sadly, however, Gonzalo's previously supportive relatives immediately disowned him. Social standing and ethnic background meant a lot in sixteenth-century Spain.

The rejection by his relatives, a situation Gonzalo bravely suffered, may have stemmed from economic differences, but another line of interpretation ascribes it to his being of mixed Spanish-Jewish descent. His marriage to Catalina, a woman possibly of Arab-Muslim background, and definitely from a lower economic class, could only further harm his family's reputation. Whatever the truth of their backgrounds, these newlyweds faced a hard life.[1] With a resilience born of love, Gonzalo moved into his wife's boarding house and did what he could to help her at the loom and to sell their wares.

Later, Catalina and Gonzalo settled into a modest house in Fontiveros. Over the course of a dozen years, they welcomed three sons. Francisco was born in 1530, and John (Juan) in 1542.[2] At some time between those years, the middle son, Luis, was born. The family struggled economically, but they had a happy home, "where love had priority over material goods and sharing over accumulation."[3]

The family's situation changed for the worse when a serious illness struck Gonzalo. Catalina devoted herself to assisting her husband during his long decline. He died when John was just a toddler. A crisis arose after his death. Bereft of Gonzalo's love and financial support, Catalina and her boys struggled to survive. Families like John's, headed by a single mother who tried to eke out an existence as a weaver, were easily overlooked and left to founder.

As a child, John lived with his family on the fringes of society during Spain's "Golden Age," a term masking the severe poverty that also existed. Spain had become a political, religious, and cultural force in the world. It had sent explorers to the New World. Commerce and agriculture thrived, but with a limited distribution of wealth. Despite its riches and power, Spain spent much of its resources to fund its conflicts with foreign forces. The treasures pouring in from the New World reached the prosperous, more established populace, but not the impoverished masses who suffered from discrimination, unhealthy conditions, and unemployment. During the 1540s, central Spain entered "the barren years," a time of poor harvests in Castile, which resulted in a downward spiral of resources for the needy.

For a time the young widow Catalina served as a paid wet nurse for her infant niece. But with the hope that Gonzalo's brothers in Toledo would help their nephews, she set out on the difficult 110-mile journey with her three sons. Desperate for adequate food and security, they probably had to beg along the way. Despite the beautiful countryside of fields, hills, and valleys, Catalina must have worried about their survival.

One of the boys' uncles, a clergyman (archdeacon) in Toledo, quickly dashed Catalina's hopes by sending her away. We can only wonder what effect the hard-heartedness of this man of God had on John. Maybe his memory of that rejection readied him to experience the need to love the Church realistically despite its imperfect and sinful members.

Sad but undaunted, Catalina and her sons made their way to nearby Galvez to see Gonzalo's other brother, Juan de Yepes, a married medical doctor who then had no children. This visit

stirred their hopes. Juan de Yepes offered to house, educate, and leave his fortune to Francisco. Francisco was far from intellectually talented, but this generous overture seemed to guarantee him a promising future. A relieved Catalina and her younger sons bid a sad farewell to Francisco and then made the long journey home to Fontiveros.

As often happens in situations rooted in desperation, Francisco soon grew to dislike his new home. He suffered under the almost slave-like conditions to which his uncle's wife subjected him. She surreptitiously blocked his education. When Catalina did not hear from Francisco, she painstakingly returned to Toledo to check on him. What she found made her determined to bring him home to Fontiveros. Although the remorseful uncle promised to improve the situation, Catalina didn't trust him. After a year away from home, Francisco returned to live with his mother and brothers. He was glad to be with them again, despite their meager surroundings. Unable to read or write, Francisco became a weaver, an occupation he would practice for the rest of his life.

Catalina struggled to put nourishing food on the table. A few years after Gonzalo's death, in the late 1540s, the middle son, Luis, became ill and died, probably from malnutrition. John would have been old enough to feel the loss.

John's physical condition could not have been good. Always small in stature, he probably suffered from rickets, a disease caused by poor nourishment. His most reliable early biographer, Jeronimo de San José, would later described him as being "between small and medium in height, well proportioned in body, although thin from the rigorous penance he performed."

Jeronimo also noted John's dark complexion and his becoming "venerably bald, with a little hair in the front" in later life. He had a broad forehead and dark eyes. John was robust enough to undertake tough trips over rugged landscapes.[4]

Despite their widely different ages, Francisco and John got along well. John was unlike other children in the town, many of them from larger families. John probably spent much time alone. Perhaps this solitude sharpened his focus on God, which only grew as he got older. Later in life, advocating the cultivation of prayerful solitude, John advised: "Be joyful and gladdened in your interior recollection with him [God], for you have him so close to you. Desire him there, adore him there."[5]

Relocating to Survive

Although Francisco was helping to bring money into the fatherless family, in about 1548 ongoing poverty led Catalina to move with her two surviving sons to Arevalo, eighteen miles northeast of Fontiveros. She must have felt heartbroken to leave the town where she and Gonzalo had met and where she buried him and their son. But she courageously undertook the trip, hoping to improve the family's lot.

Once settled in Arevalo, Catalina and Francisco found employment as day-laborers in weaving shops. The still thin but growing John went to school. He closely observed the comings and goings of his older brother, Francisco, who got involved in some time-wasting pranks and misdeeds. With the help of a priest who urged the older boy to turn toward better patterns of living, Francisco quieted down and began to practice calming

prayer. He often sought niches outdoors in which to lie down and focus on God, and in tough weather he did so in church or at home. Who knows what impact this example of contemplative practice may have had on young John?

Eventually Francisco met and married Ana Izquierda, who filled out the small household with her presence. Along with Catalina, and though owning little, the newlyweds shared their goods with people more destitute than themselves. Sometimes they even sheltered the needy in their little home. This atmosphere of love and selfless care for the downtrodden certainly made its mark on John.

The Yepes household continued to struggle financially, and around 1551, when John was nine, Catalina decided to move the family once again, this time twenty miles northwest to Medina del Campo, the market town where Gonzalo had sold cloth. As was the case in their prior locations, the family lived in a predominantly Islamic neighborhood. This fact has led some historians to consider the possibility that the Catholic Catalina had at least some remote Muslim background.[6]

Medina del Campo came alive each year in the spring and fall. Vendors and customers of cloth thronged to its lively fairs. As experts in weaving, the Yepes family benefited from the yearly trade and decided to make Medina del Campo their permanent home. Here Catalina seized an opportunity to have John sent to a "catechism school," the School of Doctrine, recently established in Medina. The institution's purpose was to combat delinquency among young men of poor families. While staying there, not far from his family, John would have education and faith formation. He would work alongside artisans in order to

earn his keep. John enrolled in the school around 1552. As Francisco would later tell it, his younger brother and the other students (aged seven to fourteen) were apprenticed to masters of assorted trades: carpentry, tailoring, wood-carving, and painting. Few students were expected to move on to further studies. Disappointingly, John did not gain enough proficiency in any of the trades, although his dabbling in them gave him the basic skills he would use throughout life. His awareness of tools and methods also gave the future poet examples and metaphors he could later employ when writing about matters far more sublime.

Despite his awkwardness in the skills of various trades, John had exceptional proficiency in language arts and handwriting. Run by Augustinian religious sisters, the school provided Catalina a lifeline in her heroic efforts to raise John. His studies readied him to tackle advanced subjects in an academic life that was rare and perhaps suspect among his illiterate family members and neighbors. Moreover, it richly supplied the boy with faith-based discipline adapted from a monastic model.

John was among those chosen from the school to assist most mornings with duties at La Magdalena, the local church with its attached convent. Serving Mass and running errands for the sisters gave John a sense of accomplishment he had not found in the manual trades. He enjoyed worshiping at Mass, and the Gospel message captivated him more than most of his peers. The sacristans and the Augustinian sisters acclaimed him for his intelligence, maturity, and virtue. He used these gifts when he was sent out into the streets to beg for the livelihood of the school. Accustomed to difficulty, John proved he could apply

himself to this unappealing task. His steadiness and flexibility prepared him to serve in new and more challenging ways.

As with most young boys, John experienced calamities. He once fell into a well while playing, and the adults who had rushed to his aid were surprised he had not drowned. They threw him a rope and pulled him to safety, but John attributed his rescue mostly to the Blessed Virgin Mary's protection. Indeed he was full of religious fervor. He delighted in reading about the lives, feats, and miracles of the early Christian monks, which were available to him in highly sensationalized stories. The accounts fueled his sense of God's power at work in people open to letting God guide them.

Back at home, the Yepes family continued to face loss. Francisco and his wife, Ana, suffered the deaths of all but one of their seven or eight children.[7] Yet, despite his personal sorrows, the bereaved father spent much of his time begging for the poor. The civil authorities once suspected him of being a self-seeking nuisance until they discovered how much his begging helped the destitute. As he roamed the streets, Francisco often carried unfortunate people into the community's hospitals. At that time, abandoned infants were brought to church for adoption by welcoming families, and Francisco helped orchestrate that charitable process. Catalina once provided a home for a dying baby. The struggling Yepes family steadily resisted inevitable temptations toward bitterness or self-pity. Soon John would show that he had learned these lessons well.