

Carmelites honor life of St. John of the Cross

By Father Robert F. McNamara
Guest contributor

St. John of the Cross, spiritual theologian and collaborator with St. Teresa of Avila in the Catholic Reformation, died just 400 years ago. This year the Discalced Carmelites — including the nuns at the Monastery of Our Lady and St. Joseph on Jefferson Road in Pittsford — are celebrating this quatercentenary of their co-founder.

Who was St. John of the Cross, this Carmelite priest and mystic whom Teresa of Avila called "great in the eyes of God," and whom Pope John Paul II has adopted as his own "sure guide in the ways of faith?"

He was a native of Fontiveros in New Castile, Spain. Born Juan de Yepes in 1542, he was the third and last child of a worthy but impoverished couple. After receiving his elementary schooling in a "poor school," he planned to learn a craft to support himself. But in all the crafts he tried — woodworking, tailoring, engraving and painting — he proved to be "all thumbs."

His abilities surfaced, however, when he turned to study and the care of the sick in Median del Campo. Still greater was his talent for prayer and self-denial during his late teens.

In 1563, de Yepes entered the Carmelite Order, which had a monastery at Medina. Clothed in the Carmelite habit and given the religious name John of St. Matthias, he made a yearlong novitiate and took his first vows of poverty, chastity and obedience.

At that time the Carmelite Fathers were following a modified form of the old Carmelite rule of life. Friar John, already a staunch ascetic, asked permission to follow the original, stricter rule. Apparently he was convinced that amid a century in which the Protestant Reformation had severely shaken the Catholic Church, Catholics should strive to be more fervent rather than less.

Indeed, when John was ordained a priest



This portrait of St. Teresa of Avila by Fray Juan de la Miseria, 1576, hangs in the house of the Discalced Carmelites at Valladolid.

In 1567, he was half-persuaded to transfer to the most austere of religious orders, the Carthusian hermits. But his meeting with St. Teresa of Avila on the occasion of his first Mass resulted in his dismissing the thought.

St. Teresa, 27 years older than young Father John, immediately saw in him an ideal assistant for her work to reform the Carmelite Order. In their conversation, she told him she thus far had established monasteries of the strict rule only for women, but that she was about to set up reformist houses for males as well. Wouldn't it be better, she asked him, if he should stay in his own religious community and work to bring it back to its ancient ideal?

John accepted gingerly, but the die was cast. Thenceforth the motherly nun and her idealistic spiritual son became permanently associated, complementing each other both as administrators and as spiritual counselors.



St. John of the Cross, OCD, lived from 1542-1591.

Teresa opened the first "contemplative" monastery for men at Duruelo in 1568. Father Juan was named subprior of the ramshackle little house and master of the novices (only two at the outset). In the years that followed, she and St. John established monasteries for a growing number of friars. The members followed the stricter "vegetarian" rule to the letter. They came to be called "discalced," or "shoeless" Carmelites because they wore sandals.

From the start at Duruelo, they won public acclaim for their devotional life, preaching and counseling. After its co-founders' deaths, the movement would spread into many lands. The first permanent American monastery of Carmelite nuns opened at Port Tobacco, Maryland, in 1790. German friars founded the first permanent American monastery of male Discalced Carmelites at Holy Hill, Wisconsin, in 1906.

When he entered the reformist Carmelites, the co-founder changed his name from "John of St. Matthias" to "John of the Cross." The change was typical of the man. It was also prophetic.

St. Teresa's reform movement had the approval of Rome, but it was not until 1580 that the Holy See acknowledged the Discalced as a separate Carmelite province, and only in 1593 as an independent Carmelite order.

Meanwhile jurisdictional problems arose. Thus, in 1575 the regular Carmelite superiors ordered John of the Cross to cease his reformist activities. When he said he could not, he was scourged and shut up in a dim, tiny monastic cell at Toledo. The superiors may have had technical justification for punishing his "disobedience," but they went too far. Still, St. John accepted the sentence without complaint, and used the eight months to begin the series of profound spiritual poems for which he is especially noted.

Eventually, however, he took advantage of the opportunity, perhaps miraculously offered, to escape his prison and take refuge in a Discalced monastery many miles away.

In his constant effort to imitate Christ, St. John not only resigned himself to whatever befell him, but positively sought out "not the easiest but the hardest; not that which comforts but that which grieves; not more but less." Delighted by a humility he found liberating, he constantly asked God for three favors: that he might pass no day without some suffering; that at the

time of his death he hold no administrative office; and that he would end his life in amid personal dishonor and contempt.

God granted his petitions. A group of Discalced friars took up a campaign to discredit him and oust him from the order. The campaign was successful enough to turn many of his confreres against him. And when he was in his final illness and without authority, the local superior forbade showing him any kindness. One could almost have guessed what would be his last words before his death on December 14, 1591: "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit."

But as soon as John died the cloud lifted, and all hailed him as a saint. He was canonized in 1726, and in 1926 was proclaimed a doctor of the church. What qualified him for this doctrinal honor? It was his deep analysis of the process of reaching perfection, that is, union with God. His Christ-centered writings are profound instruction in contemplation.

In a quatercentennial letter to the superior general of the Discalced Carmelites, Pope John Paul II said he believes John of the Cross's greatest gift to us is his teaching on the need of faith. The saint helped his own troubled generation by building up in himself and others an "adult" faith that blossomed into a sense of solidarity with neighbor, said the pope, who many years ago wrote his doctoral dissertation on "Faith according to St. John of the Cross."

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