

Sr. Margaret Dorgan's Reflection

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JOHN OF THE CROSS: AN ADVENT SAINT

The shepherds walked through the night to find in a manger the Savior of humankind, Who had been announced by an angel proclaiming "tidings of great joy to be shared by the whole people" (Lk 2:10). Is this the way to expect a heavenly Redeemer to enter the world He has come to save? There was no room for Him in the inn where Mary and Joseph had sought shelter. Jesus comes to us in ways wholly unexpected. And He will continue to do so.

Spiritual guides tell us how God may be discovered under appearances we would not foresee. During these Advent days on December 14, we celebrate the feast of St. John of the Cross, especially known for his writing about the journey to God through darkness. As the shepherds made their way without the light of the sun, so in our spiritual lives when we draw closer to God, a special kind of darkness can be our experience.

Born in Fontiveros , Spain , John himself had known the deprivation of poverty. He was raised by a widowed mother so poor that an earlier son may have died of malnutrition. Richer relatives rejected this little family when their father died, because he had loved and married a woman far below his social status. In a time of widespread illiteracy, John was enrolled in a school where reading and writing "he learned well and in a short time." He was sent out to beg for the children of the school he attended. Later he worked in a hospital established especially for patients with venereal diseases. In his sixteenth century world, this was not a place with a well-trained efficient staff and hygienic conditions. Most sick people were cared for at home, with the help of servants if the household had resources. At that time those who went to a hospital were too often castaways of society. To give devoted care to these rejects further opened John's eyes to human misery.

A youth of twenty years, John entered the Carmelite order. He studied at the University of Salamanca , was ordained, and later joined Teresa of Avila in initiating the Discalced Reform. As pain had been so much a part of his early years, so now he was subject to ongoing trials. When John speaks of a way of suffering as a pathway to God, he is often reflecting on what he had endured. Yet more than pain, his message aims at the joy and wonder that come to us through Jesus Christ.

The darkness of that Bethlehem night held the glory of God's greatest gift to humanity. The Carmelite friar's description of going to God through the night is not a sad dirge at all. He tells us that the night he describes is really God coming to us with the intensity of a light so dazzling it overwhelms our capacity to see. We walk through the nights of our lives with the assurance that we will see a new dawn, more glorious than any we have looked at before.

John was declared a doctor of the church in 1926 and in 1952 was honored in his native land as the patron of Spanish poets. St. Teresa of Avila wrote poetry too, the kind of adequate verse that enriches an occasion and is then forgotten. Not so with John. His genius as a poet lifts his work to the realm of the sublime.

His pages are directed to the spiritual encounter of God and the human person. Happily for us, he was asked to explain these lines. Thus we have commentaries that are recognized in the Catholic church, and even beyond Christianity, as among the most profound mystical treatises ever produced.

John writes primarily for those who have moved beyond the early stages of prayer, but every reader will discover passages that inspire and draw the heart to greater longing. John offers confident hope that in our quest for God we will reach our goal, for God desires us much more than we desire God. And the fullness of divine union is granted to us in Jesus Christ.

In *The Prayer of a Soul Taken with Love*, the saint declares with certainty, "You will not take from me, my God, what You once gave me in Your only Son, Jesus Christ, in Whom You gave me all I desire. Hence I rejoice that if I wait for You, You will not delay."

Prayer is an attitude of waiting with yearning. God, Who has given us Jesus Christ, will give us all else besides. "O sweetest love of God, so little known, whoever has found this rich mine is at rest" (No. 16, Sayings of Light and Love).

We find in Bethlehem what all human hearts are seeking. **"God gave us eternal life and this life is in God's Son"** (1 Jn 5:12). John of the Cross describes in words of fire how that life ignites our hearts. From the flame burning within us, we reach out as the shepherds did that blessed night to communicate the blessedness of Christ to others.

(*The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, an 814-page hardcover volume, is available at ICS Publications, 2131 Lincoln Rd. NE , Washington , DC 20002-1199 . Toll free **1-800-832-8489**.)

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