

Jesus faced constant harassment from the Pharisees and the scribes. Followers of Jesus should not be surprised if the same happens to them. December 14<sup>th</sup> is the Memorial of Saint John of the Cross, a great reformer in the Carmelite Order. John's efforts to call his brothers into greater conformity with the life of Christ resulted in great redemptive suffering for his own soul and for the benefit of the church.

As a young adult, he worked in a hospital for the poor while attending college in Medina del Campo all the while practicing an austere life of penance and prayer. At the age of 21, he felt a calling to religious life and John entered the Carmelite Order. At the time, the Carmelites lived a little too worldly for his tastes and he received special permission to live according to their original rule which stressed solitude, silence, poverty, work, and contemplative prayer. John was ordained as a priest in 1567.

He met a kindred soul in Teresa of Avila who had been a nun for 32 years by this time. Within the order for Carmelite women, she advocated for a return to the strict observance of their original way of life. These two reformers met with the same scorn as the Pharisees and scribes had for Jesus. Teresa encouraged John to stay the course as a Carmelite and work for reform of the men's order.

John took on the new name of John of the Cross as he helped to rebuild the Discalced Carmelites. The reforming movement grew quickly at first. But these efforts were put to a severe test as others balked at the life of radical poverty and sacrifice. John's opponents thought they could silence him through intimidation. They imprisoned him in a tiny cell and regularly punished him with public beatings. During this very dark and trying time, John received great spiritual insights and graces from God. Some of his most exquisite poetry dates from that period. After nine months, he made good his escape in a miraculous manner.<sup>i</sup>

Spiritually strengthened through this ordeal, he returned to the work of reform that God called him to. Over the course of the next decade, he set out his spiritual teachings in works such as "The Ascent of Mount Carmel," "The Spiritual Canticle" and "The Living Flame of Love" as well as "The Dark Night of the Soul."<sup>iii</sup> We need to love God above all things. If we make that commitment, nothing can hold us back in our spiritual lives.

His religious life was most difficult for all the un-Christian opposition he faced from his religious brothers. "Suspicion, mistreatment, and humiliation had characterized much of his time in religious life, but these trials are understood as having brought him closer to God by breaking his dependence on the things of this world."<sup>iii</sup> John responded with the love of Christ forgiving his oppressors and seeing his sacrifices bring about conversion in his opponents. John was never bitter. His constant prayer was "to suffer and to be despised."<sup>iv</sup> The more he united his suffering with the suffering of Christ, the more he grew in his ability to love his enemies.

Towards the end of his life, John's wisdom and holiness were finally recognized by his religious superiors. He was called home to his heavenly reward on December 14<sup>th</sup>, 1591 at the age of 49. The truth set John of the Cross free. Shortly after his death, the spiritual depth and breadth of his writings won wide favor.

The essence of Saint John of the Cross's teaching for the Carmelites as well as the Church is this: Through a vigorous and living faith we seek and find God in His Son Jesus Christ ... in the Church, in the beauty of creation, in quiet prayer, in the darkness of night, and in the purifying flame of the Spirit.<sup>v</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> catholicnewsagency.com/resources/advent/saints-of-advent/st-john-of-the-cross-december-14

<sup>ii</sup> catholicnewsagency.com/saint/st-john-of-the-cross-84

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid

<sup>iv</sup> catholicnewsagency.com/resources/advent/saints-of-advent/st-john-of-the-cross-december-14

<sup>v</sup> John Paul II. ewtn.com/catholicism/library/master-in-the-faith-8924