

ST. FRANCIS OF ASSISI AND ST. JOHN OF THE CROSS

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Perhaps it was inevitable that I would one day write about Franciscan spirituality since I was^A religious for a short time when I was relatively young. Spirituality has been an important part of my life and consciousness even before I really was aware that there was such a thing as Franciscan spirituality.

Like most Carmelites, mysticism and the lives of mystics are very important to us since our Holy Mother Teresa and our Holy Father John were both mystics.

Francis, Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross had one thing in common: an excessive love for Jesus and his Mother, and God was the center of their lives.

Francis, like John and Teresa, was a poet and he could see God in all of nature and referred to brother sun and *sister* moon. And as we Carmelites know, John of the Cross is the greatest of Spanish poets.

Before the Carmelite reform of the sixteenth century had actually gotten underway, there was a reform movement taking place among the Franciscans led by St. Peter of Alcantara. He also sought to revive the primitive spirit of his order. It is certain that St. Peter of Alcantara was instrumental in bringing the spirit of reform to Carmel through his influence on a Carmelite nun.

It was Teresa who led the reform movement. After founding several reformed communities of nuns, she recruited St. John of the Cross to found a community of men who wanted to live according to the primitive rule of Carmelites. Teresa (in Foundations) said that it was a much greater grace -- that she -- a woman -- should found a community of men -- than the grace she was given enabling her to found houses for cloistered nuns. ^P(The Franciscan heritage has influenced the Carmelite reform, especially as reflected in the life of St. John of the Cross.)

Pope Pius XI said, "---- there has never been anyone in whom the image of Jesus Christ and the evangelical manner of life shown forth more life-like and strikingly than in St. Francis." St. Francis became ^A model of the holy life for Latin Christianity. With the possible exception of St. Benedict and St. Ignatius of Loyola, no saint has exerted such great influence on western religion. This had a great influence on St. John of the Cross and Carmelite reform. One must wonder whether consciously or unconsciously if St. John looked to St. Francis as a model of holiness. As for myself, the history of the life of St. Francis was the greatest mystic I was exposed to.

It was quite interesting to note that both of these saints were sons of cloth merchants. And whereas St. Francis' baptismal name was John, St. John's older brother, was named Francis.

Both saints were described as "medium height". St. Teresa referred to John as "the holy little Fray John". They also grew up under similar economic and political conditions during times of great mobility, prosperity and expansion. There was a great difference in the way these merchants' sons were raised. John's father was disinherited for marrying beneath his class AND died young, leaving his widow poor. Francis, too, was disinherited for ^{ESPousing} ~~marrying~~ Lady Poverty.

Both John and Francis loved the popular songs of their day. Francis was ^{an} avowed troubadour and John, too, had a touch of the troubadour in him as seen ⁱⁿ his poetry. John's poetry reflects his love for lyricism and nature. He often took those under his charge to the country just to be with God as He is found in nature. His traveling around Spain barefoot in his poor frieze habit, marveling at nature and singing praise to God, very much reminds us of Francis. Both saints lived lives of great penance although neither could ever boast of great health. Both had the experience of the ordeal of great fraternal strife and suffered very much from those who wished to distort the ideals by which they lived.

St. Francis and John of the Cross both traveled the road of poverty in their pursuit of union with God. The church has always recognized Francis as the witness par excellence of evangelical poverty. Francis' own poverty cannot be understood apart from his conversion experience; it nevertheless became a model for a new way of life in the Church, i.e the mendicant orders. Francis had "chosen glory above all in the privilege of poverty which he used to call his mother, his bride, and his lady." "He used to say that poverty was the foundation of the order."

The beginning of the Carmelite reform was marked by the severest poverty. Thanks to the support of St. Peter of Alcantara, Teresa was able to found her first reformed convent without an endowment. Once St. Clare even appeared to St. Teresa telling her to take courage and continue with what she had begun. "Little by little she (St. Clare) brought this desire of mine (for poverty) to such perfection that the poverty the blessed saint practiced in her house is practiced in this one (St. Joseph's of Avila) and we are living on alms."¹ ← It was St. Teresa who explained to Fray John all about "our way of life, so that he might have exact knowledge of everything."²

One of the nuns accompanied St. Teresa to inspect the first monastery which was in reality a small farm house. It consisted of a porch, a room with an alcove and a tiny kitchen. The nun explained, "It is clear Madre, that no one however good could put up with ~~it~~^{HIS}: Leave it alone."³ It was here that St. John of the Cross began to live according to the primitive rule.

Although St. John was by no means devoid of that actual poverty which was the ideal of St. Francis, his deep understanding of the spirit and essence of

¹ Life of St. Teresa of Avila 33:13

² Foundations C. 13

³ Foundations C. 13

poverty is best illustrated in his spiritual doctrine, the excellence of which merited him the title Doctor Ecclesiae. Poverty of spirit is the foundation for union with God.

“Nothing, nothing, nothing and even on the Mount nothing,” was the motto of the “Ascent of Mount Carmel.” “In order to come to possess all,” says St. John, “desire the possession of nothing.” It is in nakedness of spirit that the soul finds rest. “For when it covets nothing, nothing raises it up, and nothing weighs it down, because it is in the center of its humility.”⁴ John truly loved poverty as a way of being more identified with Christ. As it was for St. Francis, poverty was the cause for the humility^{by} which St. John came to regard himself as inferior to all.

The poverty of St. Francis and St. John of the Cross is inspired by their encounter with Christ crucified. Speaking from the cross, the crucified asked Francis to rebuild his church. It is noteworthy that when St. John of the Cross joined the reform, he changed his religious title from John of St. Mathias to John of the Cross, for it was in the mystery of the cross that John discovered the power by which all things are renewed in Christ. Toward the end of his life when he was praying before an image of Christ crucified, a voice said to him: “Fray John, ask me what you like, for I will grant it to you.” John’s answer was: “I wish to be despised and esteemed as of little worth.” St. John was asking to be made like Christ, crowned with thorns. This was also the profoundest desire of Francis who gave us the parable of, “True and Perfect Joy.” This parable told by St. Francis to Brother Leo, embodied the wisdom which was the outgrowth of his “great temptation,” as Celano calls it. This was the “dark night” Francis suffered when he was forced to formulate the “later rule.” The dilemma over poverty, which was at the heart of the fraternal conflict, was elevated and resolved by Francis in an even more perfect identification with Christ crucified. In the parable, true and perfect joy is

⁴ Ascent, 13:11

discovered not in learning, acclaimed preaching or miracle working. Rather, it is discovered when one is rejected by one's own brethren. Why? Because in this one is identified with Christ crucified. In John's reply to Christ we see how much he is like the author of "True and Perfect Joy."

Both of these saintly men had a true, deep love for solitude. Francis even made provisions for those who live in hermitages. Many of the followers of St. Francis spent a great amount of time in hermitages, and several of his first disciples ended their days this way. Some early writers put St. Francis in the tradition of those called the "wilderness saints," hermits noted for their poverty. In spite of his predilection for solitude, Francis chose to live a life dedicated to the conversion and conquest of the hearts of men and women for the love of God. St. John himself espoused the "mixed life" as commanded by the rule he followed. He often repeated the saying of St. Dionysius: "The most divine thing of all is to cooperate with God in the salvation of souls."⁵ The Carmelites very consciously aspired to live after the fashion of their great model, the prophet Elijah, whose cult they actually celebrated in the liturgy (To this day the Carmelites keep the feast of St. Elijah on July 20th). Elijah was also a model for them of the disciple who had received the two fold spirit of Elijah and who had disciples and moved among the people. In his "Life of St. Francis," St. Bonaventure emphasizes that his seraphic father came in the spirit and power of Elijah. It may seem like a little thing to us, but in the medieval mind, these symbols had a very great formative effect. St. John of the Cross and St. Francis are both "wilderness saints" linked by their affinity with the prophet Elijah.

One of the most indisputable similarities between John of the Cross and Francis of Assisi is their relationship to holy women. They both assisted and were assisted by women. They looked to these women as their equals, as their sisters in pursuit of union with God. Two of John's treatises, "The Living

⁵ Complete Works, Vol. 3, p. 312

Flame" and "The Spiritual Canticle", were written at the request of women. These saints had a spirituality greatly enhanced by these feminine contacts. Both John and Francis have used the bridal imagery with a creativity and freedom that is rare even in the tradition of mystical theology. Francis' use of it was admittedly unique in its application to poverty. But no less for John of the Cross is union with God founded on the soul's dispossession of all things.

Both men had similar attitudes for learning. In spite of John's reputed learning, he was no academic scholar. Both felt that learning was good as long as it did not extinguish the "spirit of prayer and devotion." St. John's words were repeated among Carmelite students; "religious and student, but religious first."

St. John of the Cross is an acknowledged master of mystical theology. But even in this, he was more akin to St. Bonaventure, that great disciple of St. Francis, than is commonly realized. He is not unlike the devout teacher in describing in poetic and symbolic imagery the soul's journey to God. Whereas St. Bonaventure derived so much insight contemplating the sacred stigmata of his seraphic father, St. John of the Cross was no less able to penetrate its significance. In fact, his doctrine in the "Living Flame" revolves around the "delightful wound" caused by the seraphim.

John sees the wound as commensurate with the greater or lesser following wounded ones will have in their doctrine and spirit. He uses St. Francis of Assisi as the pre-eminent example of this.⁶

Examples to indicate that St. John of the Cross was influenced by St. Francis. ~~are many, and I speak of another.~~ ARE MANY. ONE Like Francis, John's favorite liturgical feast was Christmas. ~~One~~ of his most beautiful poems, never completed, was on the Incarnation. It was in the birth of Jesus that the humility and poverty of God was to be contemplated. This mystery left Francis

⁶ Living Flame, 2:13, also Canticle, stanza 14, #5 a short commentary on St. Francis prayer: "My God and My All".

stammering and John singing.

St. John, like St. Francis, had a solicitude for the sick that has always been noted by his biographers. ~~As did~~ Francis, he would spare no costs for the alleviation of their illness. Both left succinct and weighty admonitions to their followers. ^{REGARDING SUCH.} ~~For that matter,~~ [#] Nothing was more succinct than the rule St. Francis wrote for his followers. Perhaps the only rule more ^{so} is the Carmelite rule which, ~~of course,~~ St. John followed. Like St. Francis, St. John ^{A MAN} was of simplicity and straightforwardness. He shunned all ostentation of authority, sharing with his subjects the most humble tasks. He said that in nothing does one show oneself so unworthy to command as when one does so imperiously. ^{ST. JOHN} was the enemy of spiritual melancholy. When he found one of his subjects sad, John would not leave him alone until the person was cheerful and optimistic again, much as St. Francis would do. An abiding and quiet joy constantly lit his face. Like Francis, he was ever courteous and mild. When John saw urbanity and delicacy in handling people being lost in superiors, he wept for the loss.

St. John was influenced by *any* in whom the image of Christ shown forth most lifelike and strikingly. It is said that *he* was enamored with the lives of the saints and was fond of reading about God's heroes, *whose* lives usually constituted his spiritual reading. John lived in a society that inherited much Franciscanism. Consciously or unconsciously, he gravitated to the spiritual values in St. Francis most proper to his own Carmelite tradition.⁷

⁷ Carmelite Digest. Spring, 1993, p. 54