
Introduction

In order to understand the boldness of Teresa and John’s spiritual and theological synthesis, we must locate them in the “harsh times”¹ in which they lived. As I have attempted to articulate in other places,² the spirituality of sixteenth-century Spain is a complex chimera. For about 100 years, beginning around 1525, the Spanish Inquisition’s suspicion of interiority and “mental prayer” resulted in ongoing investigation and punishment of *alumbrados* (a pejorative term meaning, effectively, those who have been “falsely illumined”),³ as well as intense scrutiny—and even censorship—of spiritual works, many of which ended up on the Spanish Indices of Prohibited Books.⁴ Such a climate

1. See L 33:5, where Teresa describes concerns articulated by her friends and neighbors in Avila, right at the moment of her first reformed convent (1562): “And then the devil began to try to stir things up through one person and another by having them understand that I had seen some kind of revelation in this business, and they came to me with a lot of fear, telling me that these were harsh times [“tiempos recios”] and that perhaps people would rise up against me and go to the inquisitors . . .”
2. See Ahlgren, *TAPS*, 6–31; see also Gillian T. W. Ahlgren, *Entering Teresa of Avila’s Interior Castle: A Reader’s Companion*, 5–18; and Ahlgren, “Negotiating Sanctity: Holy Women in Sixteenth-Century Spain,” *Church History* vol. 64, no. 3 (September, 1995): 373–88.
3. For more on the impact of Inquisitional suspicion of *alumbrados* on Teresa, see *TAPS*, 9–15 and *Entering*, pp. 1–13; for more on the *alumbrados* themselves, see Alastair Hamilton, *Heresy and Mysticism in Sixteenth-Century Spain* (James Clarke and Co., 1992).
4. The two major Indexes of Prohibited Books in sixteenth-century Spain were the Valdés Index (1559) and the Quiroga Index (1583). As I argued in *TAPS*, 32–66, the Valdés Index had a particular

created a minefield for people who, like Teresa and John, sensed the whisper of God to deeper relationship with God and deeper personal authenticity. It is deeply ironic that one of the most inhospitable spaces for spiritual depth produced some of Christianity's greatest mystics and spiritual teachers.

But Spanish religious officials had not always been suspicious of spirituality and mental prayer. In fact, religious reforms grounded in monastic reforms, humanist education, biblical study, and new translations of classics from the medieval mystical tradition were part of the reforms supported by Catholic monarchs Ferdinand and Isabel, beginning in the 1480s. At the time of Teresa's birth in 1515, Spanish humanism was at its height. Under the leadership of Cardinal Francisco Jiménez de Cisneros, confessor to Queen Isabella, and with the help of the humanist press at the University of Alcalá, a major spiritual reform was inaugurated. This reform movement had, at its center, vernacular translations of major medieval treatises on contemplative prayer and the mystical life, including texts by Augustine, Gregory the Great, Cassian, Bernard of Clairvaux, John Climacus, Angela of Foligno, and Hugh of Balma, whose *Sol de contemplativos* made accessible the affective Dionysian tradition developed by the Victorine school and sixteenth-century Spanish Franciscan writers such as Francisco de Osuna and Bernardino de Laredo.⁵

This intense commitment to developing a vernacular spirituality

impact on Teresa: as her understanding of the need for authoritative books on contemplative prayer in the vernacular increased, she was moved "from reading books to writing them." See *Ibid.*, esp. 39–41. For more on the impact of Inquisitional censorship in sixteenth-century Spain, see Virgilio Pinto Crespo, *Inquisición y control ideológico en la España del siglo XVI* (Barcelona: Ariel, 1983).

5. For a review of Spanish schools of spirituality in the late fifteenth century and early sixteenth century, including Cisneros' influence, see Melquíades Andres, *La teología española en el siglo XVI* 2 vols. (Madrid: Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, 1976) 1:356–426. For a list of medieval treatises available in the vernacular in the early sixteenth century, see *Ibid.*, 378–90. I summarize Cisneros' influence briefly, noting the shift toward growing suspicion of interiority after 1525, in *TAPS*, 9–15. On Hugh of Balma and the development of affective Dionysianism in Spain, see Peter Tyler, *The Return to the Mystical: Ludwig Wittgenstein, Teresa of Avila, and the Christian Mystical Tradition* (New York: Continuum, 2011). See also the text in translation in *Carthusian Spirituality: The Writings of Hugh of Balma and Guigo de Ponte* trans. Dennis D. Martin (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1997), with attention to Martin's introductory comments on affective prayer and the "taming" of Pseudo-Dionysius in *Ibid.*, 35–40. On Francisco de Osuna and Bernardino de Laredo, see Tyler, *Return to the Mystical*, 112–23 and 124–30, respectively; see also the Classics of Western Spirituality translation of Francisco de Osuna's *Spiritual Alphabet* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1981).

rooted in a thorough harvesting of medieval mystical treatises made it possible for an “unlettered” woman⁶ such as Teresa to pursue what was, at first, an intensely personal quest to understand her lived experience of God. However, as she dedicated herself to the contemplative life, shared her thirst with others, received as much training and spiritual counsel as she could, and engaged a reform of her religious order, Teresa became, herself, a leading figure in Spanish spirituality and even developed a sophisticated theological synthesis,⁷ despite opposition from some of her contemporaries, who would have preferred that she kept silent. Her fruitful collaboration with John of the Cross in the reform of the order, beginning in 1567, stimulated both of them to realize their vocation to the mystical life and to articulate and share with their contemporaries their insights about God’s profoundly mysterious and liberating accessibility.

Because of their popularity, the details of Teresa and John’s life have been painstakingly studied, and there is a rich bibliography to provide the biographical detail that I cannot include here.⁸ They were brought up in very different environments, although they have very similar genealogical profiles. Born in 1515, Teresa was raised in a blended family of twelve children, two by her father’s first marriage. “We were three sisters and nine brothers,” she writes in her *Life*.⁹ She lost her

6. To Teresa and her contemporaries, “unlettered” people were those who could not read Latin. In this sense, Teresa, like most women and, indeed, most men outside the church, was unlettered. This, in no way, should fool us into thinking that she was uneducated. As I have argued elsewhere, Teresa’s theological education rivaled that of many of her male colleagues. (See, for example, Ahlgren, *TAPS*, 39: “Despite her inability to read Latin and her lack of training in the scholastic method of the universities, Teresa had certainly read as much as many of her better versed confessors, perhaps more. . . . Lacking a teacher of contemplative technique, Teresa actively searched for guidance in contemporary spiritual literature.”)

7. I summarize that synthesis briefly in Ahlgren, “Teresa of Avila” in Carter Lindberg, ed., *The Reformation Theologians* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 311–24.

8. For starters on Teresa, I recommend my *TAPS*; Barbara Mujica, *Teresa of Ávila: Lettered Woman*; Peter Tyler, *Teresa of Ávila: Doctor of the Soul* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013); Alison Weber, *Teresa of Avila and the Rhetoric of Femininity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), and for Spanish-speakers, Daniel de Pablo Maroto, *Santa Teresa de Jesús: Nueva biografía (Escritora, fundadora, maestro)* (Madrid: Editorial de Espiritualidad, 2014). On John of the Cross, see Leonard Doohan, *The Contemporary Challenge of John of the Cross: An Introduction to His Life and Teaching* (Washington, DC: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1995); Kieran Kavanaugh, *John of the Cross: Doctor of Light and Love*. New York: Crossroad, 1999; Matthew, *Impact of God*; Colin Thompson, *John of the Cross: Songs in the Night* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2003); and Peter M. Tyler, *St. John of the Cross* (New York: Continuum, 2010).

9. *L* 1:4.

mother when she was twelve years old, and shortly after that, she was sent to live at the school associated with a local Augustinian convent. Teresa's father was a prosperous merchant, but the family's lack of "pure blood" (Teresa's paternal grandfather had converted to Christianity from Judaism and was prosecuted by the Spanish Inquisition) kept them from full integration, either into old Spanish society or into careers of public service.¹⁰ Nearly all of her nine brothers emigrated to the Americas, seeking fame and fortune—and indeed, it was the money they acquired there that would later enable Teresa to begin her reform movement.¹¹ John was born in 1542, the youngest of three children born to Gonzalo de Yepes, from a wealthy family of silk merchants in Toledo with *converso* origins. When Gonzalo married Catalina Alvarez, from a family of weavers in Medina del Campo (who may herself have been a daughter of *moriscos*, or Muslims continuing to live in Spain as a separate ethnic group), he was disowned. Gonzalo died when John was three years old, and the family struggled to survive. John's older brother Luis died when John was just eight years old—effectively, of poverty. John found refuge in a school for orphans, and then, when he was 17, he began to work at Nuestra Señora de la Concepción, a hospital established to serve those suffering from incurable diseases. Ironically, many of his patients languished of syphilis, a new disease that had entered Spain with the return of conquistadores from the Americas. John attended the Jesuit College in Medina del Campo during the years 1559–63, which would have given him a strong general grounding in the humanities—specifically, grammar, rhetoric, Greek and Latin, with exposure to Jerome, Aquinas, Bonaventure, and other theological writers.

Both Teresa and John seemed to have joined the Carmelites almost by default, although it is noteworthy that it was one of the few religious

10. Sixteenth-century Spain was marked by concern over "limpieza de sangre," or purity of lineage, and there were statutes in place to keep families of Jewish origin from public office, and even, from entering many religious orders. On the impact of the statutes, see Albert A. Sicroff, *Los Estatutos de Limpieza de Sangre: controversias entre los siglos XV y XVII* (Madrid: Taurus, 1985).

11. Hernando, Rodrigo, Lorenzo, Antonio, Jerónimo, Agustín, and Pedro, all went to the Americas. Lorenzo was responsible for the money that went to purchase the house that became San José in Avila, and he contributed more to the reform upon his return to Spain in the 1570s. For a detailed summary of Teresa's brothers' lives as *conquistadores* see Maroto, *Santa Teresa de Jesús*, 65–71.

orders in sixteenth-century Spain that resisted cultural and social discrimination against people of *converso* origin.¹² Teresa entered the convent of the Encarnación in November 1535 and spent 27 years there, before leaving to found the reformed convent of San José in Avila in 1562. John joined the Carmelite order in 1563, and then went on to study theology at the College of San Andrés in Salamanca. In 1567, he was ordained a priest and returned to Medina del Campo, where he and Teresa crossed paths for the first time.

But before we review the full flowering of their collaboration, it will be helpful to mention briefly the work of Teresa, which had cleared the path for a new mystical way. The drama of Teresa's early religious life, especially as she recounts it in her *Life*, is well-known: her severe illness as a young woman, which led her to dedicate herself to the study and practice of prayer (1535–42)¹³; her struggles to find adequate spiritual direction (1542–54)¹⁴; her gradual conversion to deepening friendship with Christ, culminating at the point in which she says, “from here onward, it is a whole new life . . . one that God lives in me” (1554–59)¹⁵; the stabilizing influence of Jesuit spiritual direction and Ignatian meditative practice¹⁶; increasing controversy as her prayer life grew more intense¹⁷; the growing desire for a lifestyle and monastic context that would support her deepening relationship with God¹⁸; a

12. The Carmelites held off adopting the Statutes of Limpieza de Sangre until after Teresa's death, and the Jesuits resisted until 1593. By contrast, the Dominicans adopted the Statutes in 1489, the Hieronymites in 1493, and the Franciscans in 1525.

13. See L chapters 4–6. Teresa's initial spiritual formation, particularly as it was mediated by the engagement with Jerome's letters, Gregory the Great's *Moralia*, John Cassian's *Conferences*, and other basics began during this timeframe.

14. L chapters 7–8 and 23.

15. This period would include the famous Lenten meditation before a statue of Christ during the Passion (the flagellation or an *Ecce Homo*) described in chapter 9 of the *Life* as well as experiences of the presence of Christ that helped her separate her life into a “before” and “after”—a period that Daniel de Pablo Maroto calls her “dark night” and which he dates from 1554 through 1559. See discussion in Maroto, 148–61, esp. 157 for his mention of the “dark night.” Teresa's clarity about the “new life” granted to her after this time is expressed in L 23:1: “It is a whole new book from here on forward—I mean, a whole new life. The one up to here was mine. The one that I have lived since I began to speak of these prayer experiences is the one that God is living in me, or so it seems to me.” Cf. Galatians 2:20.

16. See L, chapter 24.

17. See L, chapter 25.

18. The Carmelite convent of the Encarnación in Avila housed over 150 sisters and could not afford to feed and support all of them. Women of means were encouraged to leave the convent and eat with their families. Teresa herself, a popular and vivacious woman, was encouraged to cultivate

yearning for consistency, authenticity, and integration in her own life; and a communal space in which the true *communio* of the mystical life could be sustained. All of this turbulence bore fruit in the foundation of the first Discalced Carmelite convent of San José in 1562 and in the freedom, to create and sustain, with God and others, the unitive life to which Teresa felt called.

As Teresa herself reflected on these years of turbulence and contradiction, she recognized the hand of God in them, weaning her gently of all other authorities (whether confessors, spiritual directors, or even spiritual books), so that she could learn directly from God, the fount of all wisdom: “It seems to me now that God provided where I could not find anyone to teach me . . .”¹⁹ And this perspective seems to mirror John of the Cross’ description of the process of the dark night of the spirit, where the soul is weaned of derivative experiences of God (as helpful as they may have been to the soul in its earliest stages of spiritual growth), so that God can begin to instruct the soul directly. Both Teresa and John retained strong concerns about spiritual directors and other “experts” hampering the direct communication of God and the soul, and these concerns were surely rooted in the lack of spiritual depth and experience of most of their contemporaries. In Teresa’s case, these concerns (and the strong memories of her own vulnerability in the hands of those who should have exhibited better pastoral skill and spiritual wisdom) instilled in her a resolve to protect others from the kind of pernicious doubt and second-guessing of God’s grace and generosity that she had so often experienced because of the doubt of her confessors and guides.²⁰ Teresa’s sincere lament over the

friendships with potential donors to the community and found her dedication to contemplative prayer often disrupted by visits, conversations, and other consultations. See L 32:9: “This habit of leaving the house, even though I was one who used it often, was very inconvenient for me, because some people, whom the prelates could not refuse, liked me to be in their company, and so they would ask them to order me to go to them; and thus, as I was ordered, I was only rarely able to actually be in the convent.” Teresa turned this situation into an occasion to meet with spiritual teachers and, gradually, to gather a vision and support for a new form of contemplative life. As Daniel Pablo de Maroto chronicles, Teresa was absent from the convent from 1555 to 1558, living in the house of Guiomar de Ulloa; again in 1559 to consult with Pedro de Alcántara and Maridáz; and then again, toward the end of 1561 until June 1562, in the house of Luisa de la Cerda in Toledo. See Maroto, 145–47.

19. L 4:9.

20. See especially L 29:5–7, where Teresa describes the “great distress” caused by having to make a

appearance of the Valdés Index of Prohibited Books in 1559 and her subsequent vocation as a spiritual teacher and writer of mystical texts was also born out of this tremendously conflictive time, as she records:

When they took away many books written in the vernacular so that they would not be read, I felt this keenly, because reading some of them gave me solace, and now I could not read them, since they were in Latin. But then God said to me, “Do not be sad; I will give you a living book.” I could not understand why this was said to me . . . but then only a few days later, I understood it quite well . . . , for [since then] God has favored me with so much love as to teach me in so many ways that I have had little or even no need for books.²¹

Readers of Teresa’s *Life* end up feeling a vicarious sense of relief as Teresa’s struggles for spiritual authenticity resolve themselves within the context of her reform movement. While it would be naïve to idealize the religious houses or the women and men who lived in them, it is worth recognizing that both Teresa and John committed themselves intensely to the life-with-God that could be explored in that context and to the pastoral care of all those who entered them. They were intelligent people, eminently practical, and, at least in John’s case, quite gentle, and in 1567, when they joined forces in the reform, a new experiment in holiness began.

When Teresa and John met for the first time in Medina del Campo, Teresa was finalizing the foundation of the second reformed convent of the Discalced Carmelite order and just beginning to imagine more of the small contemplative communities that her new constitutions called for.²² In particular, she wanted a community of men to be part of the reform, especially because then, she and her sisters would have

sign of contempt toward Christ, out of obedience to confessors who had ordered her to do so whenever she felt Christ present. Daniel de Pablo Maroto draws connections between some of Teresa’s physical illnesses and the stress that these conflicts over authority caused in her. See Maroto, *Santa Teresa de Jesús*, 138–41.

21. L 26:5; see discussion in *TAPS*, 39–42.

22. For a review of Teresa’s vision and the history of the Constitutions that governed the reform, see Alison Weber, “Spiritual Administration: Gender and Discernment in the Carmelite Reform” in *Sixteenth-Century Studies* 31(1) Spring 2000:123–46. See also Otger Steggink, “Arraigo carmelitano de Santa Teresa,” in *The Land of Carmel: Essays in Honor of Joachim Smet*, ed. Paul Chandler and Keith J. Egan (Rome: Institutum Carmelitanum, 1991), 259–84, and Daniel de Pablo Maroto, *Ser y misión del Carmelo Teresiano: Historia de un carisma* (Madrid: Editorial de Espiritualidad, 2010).

priests and confessors who were themselves well-formed in the mystical life. John sought greater solitude than the Carmelite tradition was offering him and was considering a transfer to the Carthusian order. Although the two were of very different temperaments, it did not take them long to recognize their similar vision, passion, determination, and longing. It was an intense yearning to bring the searing love of God into the world, and Teresa immortalizes their joint passion to endure anything for the love of God in a throwaway comment in the sixth dwelling places of her *Interior Castle*, when she writes:

I know of someone—well, of two people, one of whom was a man—to whom God had given some of these favors . . . and yet, they so yearned to suffer that they complained to our Lord because God was giving them such great gifts, and if they could refuse to receive them, they would.²³

John initially installed himself in a very primitive house at Duruelo, where he and up to three others lived a legendary life of poverty and austerity that suited a fierce depth of interior prayer. Teresa describes how their prayer was so deep that during the harsh days of winter, snow would gather on their habits without their even noticing.²⁴

Several years later, beginning in 1571, their collaborative energy bore its deepest fruit when Teresa was appointed prioress of the large (and still unreformed) convent of the Encarnación. Very aware of the convent's dynamics, Teresa took on the task with trepidation. One of her first decisions was to bring the kindly, wise John, not yet thirty years old, to serve as the convent's spiritual director. As she wrote of him later to another sister, this "celestial and divine man . . . is without equal in all of Castile. There is no one who inspires such fervor on the path to heaven."²⁵ Teresa was certain that John's care and spiritual encouragement of the sisters at the Encarnación would inspire greater thirst for and commitment to the mystical life. The move was a brilliant one. As Teresa well knew, "you cannot begin to recollect yourselves by

23. M VI:9:17.

24. F 13–14, especially her description in 14:6–12. See discussion in Tyler, *St. John of the Cross*, 21–22.

25. From Letter 268, November 1578.

force but only by gentleness, if your recollection is going to be more continual.”²⁶ As one of the sisters at the Encarnación later recalled of John, “He had a gift for consoling those who came to him, by his words and in the cards he wrote . . . I received some myself—also some jottings about spiritual matters. I would dearly love to have them now.”²⁷

This time period of the mid-1570s at the Encarnación represents one of the tradition’s greatest and most deliberate collaborations between two great mystics. Their success in establishing Avila as a dynamic space of dedication to the mystical life triggered substantial resistance to the reform, even as the nuns at the Encarnación made great progress through the first half of the 1570s.²⁸ For Teresa, too, these were years of significant growth in the mystical life. Insights that she could not yet articulate when she wrote *The Book of Her Life* were becoming clearer and more comprehensible as her unitive life with God grew more integrated and sustained. It was precisely in the years between 1572 and 1577 that, experientially, she entered into the realms of the mystical life that she would soon describe as the seven dwelling places of the *Interior Castle*. In this culmination of the unitive life, Teresa no longer knew God only in partial encounters, but continually lived in the constancy of a realized partnership with God, participating in the Trinitarian life. Teresa’s capacity to articulate these experiences is reflected in the *Interior Castle*, written in 1577 and superseding, theologically, her *Life*.

What happens next in the chronology (we are in November 1577—literally three days after Teresa finished writing her *Interior Castle*) is both a travesty and a sort of watershed for the entire mystical tradition. John of the Cross was violently kidnapped by his nonreformed brothers in religious life. Taken from Avila to Toledo,

26. IC II:1:10; see below, pp. 27–8.

27. Silverio de Santa Teresa, ed., *Biblioteca Mística Carmelitana* 10:31, cited in Matthew, *Impact of God*, 19–20.

28. We will review the resistance to Teresa and John below. See Leonard Doohan’s brief summary of this “golden age” in his *The Contemporary Challenge of John of the Cross: An Introduction to His Life and Teaching*, p. 13: “Eventually John became, along with Teresa, one of the two principal spiritual guides of the Incarnation, and by the end of 1572 peace and renewal were coming to the convent. . . . While at the Incarnation, John’s reputation as a spiritual guide grew, and others outside the convent entrusted extremely difficult discernment cases to him.”

he spent nine months in captivity, where flogging and severe mental torture turned his world inside out. As he referred to the experience a few years later to Catalina de Jesús, “that whale swallowed me up and vomited me out.”²⁹ Peter Tyler is right to call this “an iconic nine months . . . the transforming moment of his life.”³⁰ The fact that he survived is remarkable enough; that this experience somehow helped crystallize for him the reality of God’s tenderness and loving care is testimony both to his maturity as a human being and to something core, essential, and powerful about the ontological bond between God and humanity.

Teresa responded to John’s kidnapping with shock, horror, and direct advocacy. She immediately did everything she could to locate and rescue him, appealing to religious and secular authorities to intervene in a situation that cried out for adjudication and remediation. More privately, in a letter to María de San José, prioress of the Discalced convent in Seville, Teresa revealed not only her indignation at the injustice of the events, but her personal sorrow and distress, feeling deeply the specific details: John and his companion Germán de San Matías had been lashed several times and violently treated; when Germán was taken away, the sisters of the Encarnación said that he was bleeding through his mouth.³¹ Teresa begged María de San José for her prayers, both for her sisters and for the two “holy prisoners,” and her language indicates that she is keenly aware of the suffering of her friends. In her ongoing correspondence with María over the next months, she keeps vigil, marking time from the day that they were seized: “Tomorrow will make eight days that they have been imprisoned . . . ” and, “For although today makes sixteen days since our two brothers were imprisoned, we do not know if they have released them . . . ”³² For the next six months, Teresa used all means possible to advocate for the release of John of the Cross, considering who might be able to influence, compel, and/or punish the Calced who

29. John of the Cross, Letter to Catalina de Jesús from Baeza, dated July 6, 1581. *JOC*, 874.

30. See Tyler, *St. John of the Cross*, 27.

31. Letter 214: 9 (December 10, 1577).

32. Letter 214:10; Letter 215:2.

had imprisoned him. Her letters during this time reflect her efforts to secure intervention, from state and ecclesiastical officials, that would provide for John of the Cross' liberation and for the protection of the Discalced from the governance of the Calced.³³ Despite her efforts, John remained imprisoned until he himself escaped from the Calced brothers in Toledo in August 1578, nine months after being seized from his home. When she learned of his treatment in more detail, Teresa expressed her shock and abhorrence of the injustice in a letter to Jerónimo Gracián, encouraging him to inform the papal nuncio of the entire situation.³⁴ Here, we see both Teresa's righteous indignation and her conviction that bringing darkness and injustice into the light is a service both to God and to God's people. Teresa's actions provide a clear example of the prophetic dimensions of contemplative life.

Both the "Dark Night" and the "Spiritual Canticle" were born in this pitiful moment of John's life, although it would take months for him to recover, physically and emotionally, from the experience,³⁵ and only in subsequent years could the poetry and its commentary make their way to writing. Although his spirituality is often characterized with words like "passivity" and even "quietism", it should be instructive to us that he courageously and stealthily found the means to escape from captivity. This would have required him to unbolt the padlocked door, measure the distance from the monastery window down the cliffs to the city wall below, fashion a sturdy enough rope from strips of his blanket and what remained of his clothing, get down the rope under cover of night, and make his way painfully to the discalced convent across town.³⁶

33. See, for example, her letter to Teutonio de Braganza of January 16, 1578, which mentions a formal complaint to the Consejo (Letter 217:12). See also her correspondence with Roque de Huerta in Madrid (dated March 9, 1578) and her letter to Jerónimo Gracián dated March 10–11, 1578.

34. Letter 252 (August 21, 1578): "I tell you that it really weighs on me what they have done to friar John of the Cross; I do not know how God permits such things. . . . Through all these nine months past he was in a cell in which he hardly even fit, as small as he is, and in all that time he could not even change his tunic, even though he was at the point of death. . . . It is good that the details be known, that people might be on their guard against such folk. May God forgive them!"

35. All contemporary sources record John as slight and not terribly robust; this leads Peter Tyler to speculate that the nine months of grueling conditions in the cell "probably contributed significantly to his early death at 49 in 1591." See Tyler, *St. John of the Cross*, 27.

36. Peter Tyler reconstructs this in Tyler, *St. John of the Cross*, 27–28, 32.

Teresa and John spoke of God with power and authority. People who listened deeply to what they taught were changed. The fact that their teachings generated strong, even violent, resistance from some who rejected the reforms they called for is, likely, another indication of both the authenticity of their message and how compelling their understanding of God and of the mystical life was. The depth and substance of their teaching, its subjective richness, and its capacity to resonate with readers across time and space give us new eyes to understand our own reality. Over the 25 years that I have been teaching this material, it is a source of encouragement and consolation to me to see how it creates possibilities for generations of people to gain insight into their own lived experience of God.

In a culture that is as superficial as ours so often is³⁷, Teresa and John not only invite us to the depth and richness of life, but also “help people connect with the vitality concealed in what is already there.”³⁸ If today’s “shortage of depth” is intellectual, moral, and spiritual, it is also, simply, human. Indeed, there is a general confusion of what it is to be human, of what truly matters, of how to live a meaningful life despite the chaos of an age in which there is simply too much information, too much data to sort through. This makes an insight such as John’s simple—“it was for this goal of love that we were created,”³⁹ a vital truth that has the capacity to pierce the blur of our daily lives with the kind of light that brings hope and the possibility of change.

What Teresa and John make clear to us is that we are, each of us, created for union with God. Nothing less than that will satisfy us. We yearn for lives that make sense in the light of love, and, as so many

37. At an international conference entitled “Networking Jesuit Higher Education: Shaping the Future for a Humane, Just, Sustainable Globe,” held in Mexico City April 22–24, 2010, superior general of the Jesuits Adolfo Nicolás spoke compellingly of the “globalization of superficiality” that is endemic to our information age. His address, “Depth, Universality, and Learned Ministry: Challenges to Jesuit Higher Education Today,” is available in the *Santa Clara Magazine* at <http://www.scu.edu/scm/winter2010/shapingthefuture.cfm>.

38. See Matthew, *Impact of God*, 17: “John lived in an age which was well-fed with religiosity. There was no shortage of religious material, but John did perceive a shortage of depth. His concern is not to add to the material, but to help people connect with the vitality concealed in what is already there.”

39. *SCB 29:3*: “Since God has solemnly entreated that no one awaken a soul from this love [cf. Song of Songs 3:5], who will dare to do so and remain without reproof? After all, this love is the end for which we were created.”

of Christianity's great mystics have taught, we cannot be satisfied by anything less than God. What is more (and what is even more amazing) is that this powerful longing within us is only the smallest echo of a far deeper longing, in God, for us. As Iain Matthew puts it, so beautifully, as he describes John's work "pulses with God's eagerness to belong to other persons."⁴⁰ Teresa and John teach us God's deep generosity, God's constant self-giving; they show us "a self-communicating God, a God whose plan is to fill us with nothing less than God." Indeed, as Iain Matthew writes, "John's universe is drenched in a self-outpouring God."⁴¹

This is not always how John has been understood. In fact, his prose seems studded with austerity, and many would point to how often John counsels readers to aspire to, literally, "nada" (nothing). John wants us to cultivate our desire to cling to nothing in life other than God. But rather than being stark, John's "nada" is not really "nothing." Instead, it is an ample relational space, as "nada" replaces the smallness of the self with the fullness that union with God brings. But in order to reach such complete union, the desire for the unitive life must take full sway in a person's life. Our high destiny, according to John, is the aspiration to "a love equal to God's." Indeed, we have "always desired this equality, naturally and supernaturally, for lovers cannot be satisfied if they fail to feel that they love as much as they are loved."⁴² As our experience of God's love intensifies, so does our desire for full consummation of this love—a goal which would seem impossible if that loving desire were not the very seed of God planted within us. As Teresa and John both teach, the image of God, if we dedicate ourselves to cultivating it, will burn its way through our being until, we too, are part of the living flame of love that fires all life.

In an age in which people are weary and even jaded, dubious, and hesitant to invest themselves in anything, Teresa and John's confidence in the power of desire, rightly ordered and intensely focused, can provide a hopeful and helpful path toward joy and

40. Matthew, *Impact of God*, 25.

41. *Ibid.*

42. SCB 38:3.

fulfillment. Rather than cutting off desire and clipping our wings, Teresa and John teach us that love asks us to soar higher than we could hope. As Iain Matthew writes:

Survival demands a certain skepticism. We are trained to cope as social beings by keeping our desires within realistic limits. But where God is concerned, the problem lies in our desiring too little, and growing means expanding our expectations; or rather, making God's generosity, not our poverty, the measure of our expectations.⁴³

When the goal of loving as God loves us seems impossible, John “does not suggest that we settle for something more manageable. He agrees that it is distant, and says that desire will get us there.” Thus, as Matthew argues about John (and it is equally true of Teresa; indeed, this reality is critical to understanding the source of her profound humility and gratitude), “he never backs down from his statement of divine generosity.”⁴⁴

Teresa and John remind us of the power of love to motivate. They give us a lover's eagerness to love, to serve, to *be there* for the beloved, and to be a trustworthy presence for love to grow in our world. They help us to rise to the occasion of a love that holds us accountable to our own capacity for goodness and that asks us to incorporate all of our gifts and talents into a daily practice of generous self-offering. Additionally, they remind us that we cannot give what we do not have . . . that we ourselves are often too myopic to see God's loving intention, for us and for our world. In fact, even when we know better, we can find ourselves easily discouraged, often depleted, and all the more needy of the constancy of God's loving energy, empowering us with the vision, insight, strength, and purpose that we and the world we inhabit *require*.

If human beings are our only teachers as to the nature and quality of love in action, and we do not go directly to the Source and Loving Teacher of all love for answers, insights, and lessons in the “how” and not just the “what” of love, we run the risk of blindly leading (or

43. Matthew, *Impact of God*, 33.

44. *Ibid.*

following) the blind. In fact, leaving sin and malice out of the equation altogether, the painful truth of the matter is that the frustrations of daily life, our own personal foibles, and the practical reality of being human often keep us from feeling and expressing the love that we might be capable of. What Teresa and John teach us, so beautifully, is that to love is to be in a constant process of purification and refinement. Always, always, we can learn to love more and better. This reality is not meant to dishearten us—although it could, easily, if we did not have a sound method of proceeding. This “method of proceeding” is precisely what Teresa and John set out to offer.

The “method” that they describe is prayer—what we might more typically call “contemplative prayer” that takes place in silence, stillness, and the interior of the human person. What they encourage us to consider is that there is “a world” within us—an absorbing world that is (at least, when it is attuned to the Spirit of God), far more real and reliable than the world we live in. They give us criteria for assessing the quality of our lives, and, even more importantly, for discerning the depth and reality of our lives. They understand that we live in a world that is swarming with multiple sources of authority, but with very little that is true, lasting, trustworthy, or meaningful. They demonstrate, convincingly, that authentic, life-giving love is the only foundation strong enough to provide the support we need, and they show us that even this foundation will shift like sand, until we anchor it completely and thoroughly in our love-relationship with God. They teach us the garden space of the heart—its fertility and its malleability as grace rains down like water, permeating the soil of our souls and piercing our being with shafts of light. They teach us that our days, which so often fill themselves with whatever comes, can instead be punctuated by the very breath of God, drawing us into fullness of life in a space of tenderness that whispers the truths by which we aspire to live.