

Preface

Teresa of Avila (1515–82) and John of the Cross (1542–91) are two of Christianity’s greatest mystical theologians and spiritual teachers. Through their lives and writings, even from a distance of 500 years, we gain a unique glimpse of God. The legacy of these two impressive figures is that they introduce us to a God who is unfathomably generous and who longs for us with a heartbreaking fidelity and patience. This is a God who draws us into the work of making the world a place where everyone belongs, is cherished, and is accorded the innate dignity given to each human person. Their God is keenly interested in us and “constantly gazing at us,” with eyes that “anticipate, radiate, penetrate and elicit beauty.”¹ Their legacy is as keenly relevant to our day as it was to the time of great change and reform to which they belonged.

To appreciate Teresa and John in their totality, as teachers, writers, theologians, spiritual directors, religious reformers, and human beings, is a massive undertaking. Between the two of them, they wrote eight major works, many minor works, poetry, and literally thousands of notes, counsels, and letters. This outpouring of written material is but a small echo of the creative abundance of God in their lives. Their spiritual-theological synthesis represents one of the great achievements of the Christian mystical tradition, and when one understands this synthesis within its historical context, the two

1. Iain Matthew, *Impact of God* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1995), 28.

emerge as people worthy of our most profound admiration for what they accomplished as human beings.

There are obvious limitations to the kind of introduction to them that we can give in this short volume. And yet, their message is so fundamental and critical that it seems important to move surgically to the heart of what they have to offer. I shall try very hard to do that, and to do so, I will often relegate interesting and important themes to footnotes and send readers to the massive bibliography that their writings have also spawned. If I accomplish anything in this volume, I hope to give readers an introduction both to the content and substance of their theological contributions to the tradition and an invitation, at the human level, to the transformative energy that their writings convey.

Teresa and John wrote, primarily, to help others. Each had personally experienced God as a revolutionary source of vitality, capable of changing literally everything. As they dedicated themselves to partnership with God, they were determined to facilitate others' direct access to the God who had so transformed their lives. They were compassionate and dedicated contemplative teachers; they wrote for their companions on the way, knowing from experience where they might struggle, anticipating their needs, providing encouragement, and explaining how to continue on. They used simple yet evocative language, constantly self-critical, always pushing themselves to find words for the experiences that had left them thoroughly undone—"lost" on a path without words and "found" in ways they could not contain for themselves alone.

Teresa and John wrote because they had to—not (as so many commentators continue to say about Teresa) out of obedience; not only to try to communicate all that they had discovered about God; not only to extend to others, by imitation, the loving invitation to relationship that God had extended to them—but because they were now afire with a love that wanted to burn its way into the hearts of people they could not accompany in person. For them, not to write would be to try to hold back, within oneself (as if one could), the flooding dams of a wide

river needing to spill out and make its course across the earth. Not to write would be an act of disdain, ingratitude, and utter infidelity to the invitation of their Beloved to share generously the love that they themselves had been graced and privileged to receive. Not to write would be to refuse to sing of the joyful partnership with God toward which the whole of their being was attuned.

Teresa and John's thorough dedication to "this process of finding words for that for which there are no words," as Joan Chittister defines "incarnation," is a testimony to the process of incarnation itself and all of the patient midwifery that it involves. For Teresa, to lose an insight by letting it die—that is, by not putting it into action or sharing it with the one to whom she thought it might help—was an infidelity worthy of immediately seeking out her confessor.² It was this kind of purity of conscience that motivated her and gradually wrote its way out by candlelight, as she plowed through correspondence late at night or stayed faithful to the writing of the *Interior Castle* around administrative duties that might have kept any author today from setting pen to paper.³ John, too, wrote because people sought his spiritual counsel, which he spontaneously and generously gave as often as he could, but then also realized that his spiritual counsel was only as valuable as the time and space people had to take it in. Reading and re-reading a letter, an "aviso," a poem written in a moment of contemplative union would support even more deeply the spiritual progress of those he was committed to accompanying. This instinct to help, to explain, to console, and to encourage was what gave rise to his mystical treatises.

Although we today might initially turn to Teresa and John (just as their own contemporaries did) as guides who can help us find our way, Iain Matthew identifies John's greatest gift as the capacity "not so much to tell us what to do, how to pinpoint our place on the map,

2. See, for example, Teresa, letter 133 to Jerónimo Gracián (23 October 1576) and letter 162, also to Gracián (18 December 1576).

3. For insight into what the writing process was like for Teresa, see Ahlgren, *Teresa of Avila and the Politics of Sanctity* (TAPS) (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, 1996), 68–84, esp. the testimony of eyewitness María del Nacimiento, 78.

but to draw back the curtains and disclose the whole journey as real.”⁴ I think this simple sentence captures well the core of what Teresa and John offer us: even today, they help us to discern the presence of God in our lives. They help us to recognize and cling to what is most real, what matters most. We turn to them as spiritual teachers and end up being drawn into the grace at work in our own lives and the joy of collaborating in something far greater than ourselves. We read them and end up engaging theology through the back door. Or, we come clean and do the kind of theology that changes lives (ours and others’), instead of skittering at the edges of what really matters.

It is not easy to sift through outpourings of material, written by two highly intelligent, keenly sensitive human beings, both absolutely committed to leaving behind all that was not God in order to live in the depths of partnership that the mystical life entails. I shall maintain focus by trying to pinpoint what they would say if they could speak only once.⁵ This leads me to privilege Teresa’s more mature *Interior Castle* over her *Life*, both because of its more systematic coherence and because it integrates insights (theological, spiritual, and psychological) that were not possible for her to articulate in her earlier works. It also draws me to move directly to specific parts of John’s mystical corpus that facilitate a telescopic view of transforming relationship with God. And in footnotes, I have indicated some of the resonances between the stages in the mystical life as the two of them outline them.

Although the emphasis I am giving to the “testimonial” function of their works may suggest that I see them primarily as spiritual guides teaching out of their experience of God, that is not actually my primary concern. I spent a good part of my early career trying to ensure proper

4. Matthew, *Impact of God*, 16.

5. I derive this helpful principle from *Impact of God*, 3, where Matthew describes his method: “We shall go in stages. One step will be to find John’s most personal word about God, what he would say if he could speak only once.” For that insight, as well as for inspiration, friendship and just plain pure genius, I would like to express my debt to Iain. *Enkindling Love* took shape around not one, but two international congresses on the impact of Teresa of Avila on the occasion of the 500th anniversary of her birth, during which time, we met and began to forge a prayerful friendship. Each time that I would feel discouraged at the challenge of communicating and bringing to life the profound legacy of Teresa and John, I would pick up Iain’s extraordinary and masterful *The Impact of God: Soundings from St. John of the Cross*, know that he was praying for me across a wide expanse of ocean, and quickly gain the strength to keep plowing forward.

appreciation of their work as theologians—an effort that, at this point, no longer seems as necessary as it once was. But if we do now understand Teresa and John as theologians, this truly begs several questions: (1) Who do they invite us to come to know, and how does their God challenge and surprise us, even as we find this God imminently recognizable both in Scripture and tradition? (2) How does their deep dedication to intimacy with God inform our understanding of what theology itself is? (3) What are the qualifications for theological inquiry and authority? Can one really be a theologian without some rigorous relational experience of God? And how would we gauge that authenticity today? I could not possibly hope to answer those questions. But it is my hope that readers of this volume would begin to pose them because of the rich synthesis that these two authors offer us.

While *Enkindling Love* fits beautifully into Fortress' new Mapping the Tradition series, its gestation has been long. The manuscript contains threaded scraps of conversations that extend back to 2007, when I first started taking notes on John, and the project, as a whole, gained energy from exchanges at the many congresses on Teresa held in 2015, the 500th anniversary of her birth. It would be impossible to name all of the people whose comments, conversation, critical feedback, translation consultation, and general support made this book possible, but, among others, I would like to mention: Sarah Coakley, Eddie Howells, José María Mantero, Iain Matthew, Bernard and Patricia McGinn, Nohemi Melgarejo, Colin Thompson, Peter Tyler, and all who worked to make 2015 a year that truly honored the spirit of Teresa de Jesús. Some of my recent work on John of the Cross—still unpublished, but helpful in the preparation of this book—was supported by a Sabbatical Grant for Researchers from the Louisville Institute. I am also grateful for support from the Spanish Ministry of Culture's Program for Cultural Cooperation.

My warmest thanks, however, are reserved for the one whose hospitality planted the seeds of this book eight years ago. Sitting in the corner of his garden next to fragrant shoots of phlox, a gentle breeze

drew tender tears from both of my eyes, and I was moved in a heartbeat to the space of “dejando mi cuidado entre las azucenas olvidado.” As I turned to thank him, he handed me his cherished volume of John of the Cross, and invited me back to life. It is friendships such as this one that transform our dark nights of struggle and angst into loving encounters full of tender possibility. And for this friendship, I am most grateful—Deo gratias.