

St. John of the Cross: Doctor of the Church

John of the Cross (1542-91) is a Doctor of the Church, founder of the Discalced Carmelites, and one of the greatest mystical theologians in the history of the Church. Born Juan de Yepes de Álvarez in Fontiveros, Castile, Spain, he was raised by his mother, Catalina Álvarez, after his father died when John was still an infant. He studied at the Jesuit school of Medina and was apprenticed at the age of fifteen in the hospital of Our Lady of Conception. In 1563, he entered the Carmelites at their monastery of Medina del Campo (he took the name John of St. Matthias) and, after profession, was sent to the monastery of the Carmelites near the University of Salamanca. He studied there from 1564-1568 and was ordained in 1567.

As John found the Carmelites to be suffering from excessive laxity, he considered joining the more strict Carthusians but was dissuaded from this by St. Teresa of Ávila, who was then launching her famed reforms within the Carmelite Order. John had already been granted permission to adhere to the more rigid asceticism of the original rule of the order, and immediately joined Teresa in her cause. The two became close friends, and within a short time he had established the first Discalced monastery at Duruelo, adopting at the same time the name John of the Cross. The rest of his life was devoted to the promotion of reforms and to writings. From 1571-1572 he was rector of the monastery at Alcalá; from 1572-1577 he was confessor of the convent of the Incarnation at Ávila; after enduring imprisonment in 1577, he escaped and achieved the separation of the Carmelites into Discalced and Calced communities in 1579-1580; and from 1579-1582, he was rector of the college that he had established at Baeza, after which he was rector in Granada and prior at Segovia. Throughout these years, John was deeply troubled by trials and severe

opposition to his reforms from within the order, especially from friars who refused to acknowledge the validity of the Discalced Carmelites and schemed against both Teresa and John. In 1577, for example, he was imprisoned in a cell in a monastery in Toledo, escaping after nine months by making a makeshift rope and climbing to freedom on the feast of the Assumption. He found refuge in the monastery of El Calvario, in Andalusia. He lived under the constant threat of the Spanish Inquisition and faced harsh treatment at the hands of Nicola Doria, elected superior of the Discalced Carmelites in 1585. Doria's policies were so cruel that John opposed him at the general chapter of 1591. This led Doria to strip him of all offices and to banish him to the monastery of La Penuela, in Andalusia. John died on December 14, 1591, at a monastery in Ubeda.

Known as the Doctor of Mystical Theology, John was a mystic, theologian, and poet who composed a rich body of works that found their deepest expression in mystical treatises in the form of poems with theological commentaries. These renowned poems include the *Spiritual Canticle*, the *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, the *Living Flame of Love*, and the *Dark Night of the Soul*. Through these, John presented the development of the human soul through purgation, illumination, and transforming union. He remains one of the most expressive and profound mystical theologians in the long history of the Church. Beatified in 1675, he was canonized in 1726 by Pope Benedict XIII (r. 1724-1730) and declared a Doctor of the Church in 1926 by Pope Pius XI (r. 1922-1939). His feast day is December 14.