

Biographical Notes (from Holy Women, Holy Men)

John of the Cross was unknown outside the Discalced Carmelites for nearly three hundred years after his death. More recently, scholars of Christian spirituality have found in him a hidden treasure. Once described by Thomas Merton as “the church’s safest mystical theologian,” John has been called the “the poet’s poet,” “spirit of flame,” “celestial and divine.”

John was born in 1542 at Fontiveros, near Avila, Spain. After his third birthday, his father died leaving his mother and her children reduced to poverty. John received elementary education in an orphanage in Medina del Campo. By the age of seventeen he had learned carpentry, tailoring, sculpturing, and painting through apprenticeships to local craftsmen.

After university studies with the Jesuits, John entered the Carmelite Order in Medina del Campo and completed his theological studies in Salamanca. In 1567 he was ordained to the priesthood and recruited by Teresa of Avila for the reformation of the Carmelite Order.

By the age of thirty-five he had studied extensively, had been spiritual director to many, and yet devoted himself to the search for God so fully that he reached the peak of the mystical experience: a complete transformation in God.

John became disillusioned with what he considered the laxity of the Carmelites and in 1568 he opened a monastery of “Discalced” (strict observance) Carmelites, an act that met with sharp resistance from the General Chapter of the Calced Carmelites. John was seized, taken to Toledo, and imprisoned in the monastery. During nine months of great hardship, he comforted himself by writing poetry. It was while he was imprisoned that he composed the greater part of his luminous masterpiece, *The Spiritual Canticle*, as well as a number of shorter poems. Other major works are, *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, *The Living Flame of Love* and *The Dark Night*. It is this latter work, *Noche obscura del alma*, that gave the English language the phrase dark night of the soul.

After a severe illness, John died on December 14, 1591, in Ubeda, in southern Spain.