

Transformed by the Beloved

A guide to spiritual formation with
St John of the Cross

Daniel Muñoz



Foreword by
Bishop Stephen Cottrell

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by the
Beloved

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Preface

Much has been written about spiritual formation in recent years, primarily by US authors. In addition, over the past decade, there has been an increasing interest in the Christian mystics, among them the Spanish John of the Cross. In that time, a few interesting studies have been published in the UK, exploring different aspects of John's life and works, some of which are cited in this book. *Transformed by the Beloved* seeks to be a contribution to that growing collection of works, from the perspective of Christian spirituality. It is also a new resource for those who are keen to go deeper in their relationship with God. In this sense, this book seeks to be a guide to spiritual formation and transformation.

I first came across John's poetry when I was 17. It was a compulsory part of my A Level Spanish literature syllabus. I was mildly interested in his poetry, though not so sure about his religious ideas. So, when I went to university, I forgot all about John and his works. Years later, just before my ordination, I was given a copy of St John of the Cross's complete works as a gift for my priesting. Again, my first reaction was not particularly enthusiastic, and I decided to place the thick volume reverently at the top of my bookshelves. There, at least, it would look good yet harm or confuse no one. After all, I was a 21st-century Protestant minister, and Juan de la Cruz, as he is known in Spanish, was a 16th-century Catholic priest. The only thing I felt we had in common was our nationality: we were both Spaniards.

A number of years later, during one of the driest spiritual

deserts of my life, I felt prompted to rescue the dusty old book from the top shelf. I secretly hoped to find in it a quick and easy fix for my personal dark(ish) night of the soul. As I read John's poems, familiarised myself again with his life and immersed myself in his commentaries, I was drawn more and more into the world of the Spanish mystic. I discovered a man of great spiritual depth, deeply rooted in scripture, with a life centred on Christ and yet his feet firmly on the ground. Here was a man who, although he lived four and a half centuries before me, could put words to my experiences and offer words of wisdom for the journey. This connection with John's poetry and teachings not only helped to hydrate my soul during that dry spell but has also encouraged and sustained me to the present day. In fact, my current role as chaplain to Los Olivos, an ecumenical retreat centre in southern Spain, has been greatly influenced by Juan de la Cruz.

This book is about spiritual formation as a means to spiritual transformation. The chapters that follow will introduce you to the life of John of the Cross as well as his teachings and spiritual wisdom. Each chapter is an invitation to reflect on an aspect of the spiritual journey that John considered crucial if we are serious about our spiritual growth. It is also an invitation to prayer and to action, as you sit at the feet of the mystic who constantly points us to Christ, the Beloved. So, at the end of each chapter, you will have the opportunity to pray and reflect on John's teachings, often with reference to his poems. Most of John's poems can be found at the end of the book, with my own English translations opposite them.

There are at least two ways you can read this book. It can be an introduction to the key themes and spiritual teachings

of John of the Cross. If that is what you are interested in, I hope you find these pages stimulating and that by the end of the book you will feel you know John and his God better. Alternatively, it can be a guide to spiritual formation, which you can follow as an individual or as part of a small group study. If you approach this book from the spiritual formation angle, I would encourage you to read it slowly, no more than one chapter each week, and to ensure that you are accompanied by a mentor or spiritual director in the process.

The content of this book is primarily the result of years of reading and praying through John's writings, but it is also the result of wonderful conversations with wise people who know Juan de la Cruz much better than I will ever do. In this respect, I am indebted to Colin Thompson, Antonio Ángel Aguilera OCD, and the various retreatants who have taken part in retreats on John of the Cross offered at Los Olivos. I am also deeply grateful to all those family and friends who have read the initial draft of this book, and have offered their invaluable suggestions and ongoing encouragement in the process. I would especially like to thank Guy Wynter, Andrew and Billie Tweedy and Naomi Starkey.

A great part of the material found in the following pages is an adaptation of the work I did, leading retreats on the poetry and spirituality of the Spanish mystic between 2010 and 2012. My prayer is that the following will enable you to grow deeper in your love for the Beloved and to become more like him.

Soli Deo Gloria.

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Foreword

I was at a training event recently where we were all asked to think about the time in our lives when we had grown the most. For some reason I immediately found myself thinking of the first nine months of my life—the time I was growing in my mother’s womb, the time I don’t remember, but, without question, the time of my most radical growth. This in turn got me thinking about other things that happen without our effort or will. I grew in my mother’s womb in darkness and unknowing. I grew because I was in the right environment. In the right place and at the right time, I was nurtured, fed, sustained and enabled. I was in a place where those dividing cells that were my first being could become what they were meant to be. I was beloved, and in the silence and darkness of the womb I grew.

These themes of our belovedness, of darkness, presence and unknowing are the stuff of the poetry and mystical theology of St John of the Cross, and they are offered to us here in this wonderful book through the meditations and lived-out spirituality of Daniel Muñoz. Here we can encounter the gentle, transformative power of St John’s verse and vision.

I first met Daniel Muñoz in about 2008. He told me his dream of opening a retreat house in the beautiful mountains of the Sierra Nevada, close to Granada. Four years later I had the great joy of leading a retreat at *Los Olivos*, the house that he and Guy Wynter have opened. It is a place of beauty, warmth, stillness and wonderful hospitality. But although I was there to lead a retreat, there were, thankfully, moments

in between when I could walk and think, pray and dream. There was also a lovely little library of books, quite a number either about St John of the Cross or anthologies of his verse. I knew about St John; I knew about his theology and poetry but, with one exception, I had never actually read the poems.

I also knew that St John had written a lot of other theological works, but I discovered that in the main they are really just profound meditations on the poems. It is the poems themselves that are at the heart of his spiritual vision, leading us deeper into the beauty of God, where the darkness of unknowing is realised as the greatest light of all—a blinding, dazzling darkness.

Therefore they are love poems, and when we first read them it would be easy to assume they are just about human love and desire. Of course they can be read this way, but, like the Song of Songs in the Bible, these poems are love songs to God, and beautiful echoes of God's love song to us in Jesus Christ.

So that week, in between the sessions I was leading, I immersed myself in the poems and found there the beauty and warmth of St John's rich and brilliant vision. Even 'vision' feels like the wrong word. St John doesn't show us something we might aspire to; rather, he leads us, often by the way of darkness, to a relationship of sumptuous love where we know ourselves to be the beloved and God the great and gracious lover.

The beauty and warmth of the poems was mirrored in the hospitality that Daniel was providing in the house and that was all around me in the austere splendour of the Spanish mountains.

As Daniel points out in the book, St John never teaches us how to pray. What he offers is an invitation to have every-

thing else stripped back and to know God, to know that we are God's beloved; and to know that even in the hardest darkness of our lives, God can be encountered, that he is searching us out. This is a fountain whose 'clarity can never be obscured' and 'all light from it shines, although by night'.

+ *Stephen Cottrell, Bishop of Chelmsford*

Chapter 1

Life: The mystic and the poet

The qualities of the solitary bird are five: first, that it seeks the heights; second, that it admits of no companionship, not even with its own kind; third, that it stretches out its beak into the air; fourth, that it has no fixed colour; fifth, that it sings sweetly. These are the qualities that the contemplative soul has to possess... It has to sing sweetly for the love of its Spouse.¹

These words by John of the Cross sum up his entire life—who he was and who he dreamt of being. St John of the Cross (in Spanish San Juan de la Cruz, or San Juan for short) is Spain's most universally appreciated Christian writer. His poems and works have been translated into many languages and have inspired people of all faiths to search for God in deeper and more meaningful ways.

John lived in Spain in the 16th century, at a time of unprecedented change and great challenges. The country had recently been unified by the Catholic monarchs Isabel and Ferdinand, with their conquest of Granada, the last Muslim kingdom in the Iberian peninsula. In the same year, 1492, Christopher Columbus had discovered the American continent in an expedition sponsored by the Spanish monarchs. The vision of king and queen was one of unity—political, linguistic and religious unity. The latter emphasis became the cause of much pain and heartache for many

Spaniards, but also the source of creativity and spiritual renewal.

For this religious unity to work, people of other faiths, principally Muslims and Jews, had to convert to Catholic Christianity. Since the alternative was to leave the country, most of them were baptised and became nominal Catholics. Despite the change of religious allegiance, however, the overall majority continued to practise their former faiths. The Holy Inquisition was established by the Catholic monarchs in Spain in 1478, as a religious police body that would make sure all new converts had fully and truly embraced the Catholic faith. Inquisition courts were set up all over the country and the so-called 'new Christians' became targets of close scrutiny.

Eventually, and following the example of most European nations, by the end of the 15th century all Jews had been expelled from the country, in one of the saddest episodes in Spanish history. Most became exiles in North Africa, while others moved to the eastern Mediterranean. (Some of these communities still preserve the culture, music and language of 15th-century Spain.)² A century later, following a series of military revolts in some villages south of Granada, the Muslim communities were also forced to leave their homes, livelihood and country of 700 years, and became refugees in North Africa.

Religious unity also meant that no dissent was allowed from within the Catholic population. Those who embraced the Protestant ideas that came from central Europe—mainly priests and monks who had read Martin Luther's works—also had to flee to safer havens in Europe. Those who tried to stay and form emerging Protestant communities in the country soon met with opposition from the Inquisition. A

church reformation like the one taking place in central and northern Europe was avidly suppressed by monarchy and ecclesiastical authorities, for the sake of maintaining religious unity. Those Catholics who believed that a different type of Christianity was possible had only one way to change things—reforming their own church from within.

Many religious orders initiated a process of reform that modernised their institutions, in some cases made them more democratic and attempted to be more faithful to the evangelical³ spirit of their founders. Some of these Catholic reformers went beyond superficial changes and sought a renewal of the spiritual life of their own communities, with an emphasis on contemplative prayer. This is the context in which John of the Cross lived and worked.

The early years

John was born in 1542 into a humble home in the village of Fontiveros, central Spain. He was the youngest of three brothers. His father died shortly after John was born and left his widow in a very difficult financial situation. Eventually, the family moved to the more prosperous town of Medina del Campo when John was nine.

John spent his formative years (1551–64) in Medina del Campo. During this period he developed a special interest in Christian spirituality, becoming increasingly involved in his local parish church. He worked as a volunteer at the local hospice, serving those who were terminally ill and raising funds for their care. He also devoted himself to the study of the arts at the Jesuit Colegio de la Doctrina, a boarding school for poor and orphaned children.

When he had completed his education, John joined the

Carmelite convent in Medina and, a year later, in 1564, he was sent to Salamanca to read Philosophy and Theology. At the time, the University of Salamanca was the most prestigious academic centre in Spain and one of the best in Europe. John's formation lasted four years, a time during which he received classic scholastic training and excelled as a student.

The Carmelite reform

The young friar was ordained priest in 1567. The year marked a turning point in John's life. That same summer, on a visit to Medina del Campo, he met Teresa of Ávila, a charismatic nun who had initiated a reform movement within the Carmelite order. Her objective was to form Christian communities that took seriously what she and others regarded as the radical call of the gospel—simplicity of living, serving God by serving others, and deep transformational prayer. At the time, John was experiencing a growing sense of discontent with the Carmelites and had been considering changing to a different religious order that placed more emphasis on contemplative prayer. Teresa shared with him her vision of reforming the order and creating new communities throughout the country, and John accepted the challenge to join her in this venture.

The following year, Brother Juan and two other friars became the first male reformers of the Carmelite order. Over the coming years, he established several community houses in Castille, central Spain, and got involved in some of the larger convents, including that of Segovia. In addition to building and restoring houses and leading some of these communities, John acted as mentor of novices and as *confesor* (spiritual director) to many nuns, including Teresa herself.

The reform, however, was not straightforward and it met

with the opposition of those who, within the order, did not want the sort of change that Teresa and John were promoting. 2 December 1577 became another turning point in Juan's life. That night, a group of unreformed friars broke into his community house in Ávila, kidnapped John and took him to the city of Toledo. There, he was tried and accused of being a rebel. The accusations were really based on some disputes and jurisdictional conflicts between the reformed and unreformed Carmelites.

In Toledo, John remained locked up for nine long months in a dingy cell, formerly used as a latrine. The cell was dark and cold, with virtually no ventilation. John was totally isolated, both physically and spiritually, from the outside world. In the midst of these inhumane conditions, which tested his physical, emotional and spiritual strength, the most wonderful poetry came to birth. First, without pen or paper, the friar sculpted in his memory and matured in his heart verses that expressed his spiritual journey and experience. Later, when he gained the favour of his jailer and was given pen and paper, he began to write down his verses in ink. So, in the blackness of his cell and out of the dark night of the soul that he experienced during his imprisonment, John wrote some of his best-known poems.⁴

Andalucía: freedom and fruitfulness

In August 1578, John escaped from his torment in Toledo. He had befriended the jailer, who gave him enough sheets to create a long rope. One night, the guard left his cell door unlocked, and John used a window on the wall of the house that led to the river, to climb down the wall and get to the path by the river. He then walked to the reformed Carmelite

convent in the city and was looked after by the nuns until it became unsafe for him to stay there. With the support of these nuns he left for Andalucía, the southernmost region of Spain.

In this recently conquered land, the last bastion of Moorish rule in the Iberian peninsula, now repopulated with Christians who had moved from central and northern Spain, John regained his freedom and began a period of spiritual fruitfulness. He helped to found new community houses in the province of Jaen and eventually moved to the city of Granada, where he became the prior, or leader, of its reformed Carmelite convent.

Granada has been called the '*escritorio de San Juan de la Cruz*' ('Saint John of the Cross's writing desk'), for in these years of relative calm he was able to write more poems and most of his spiritual commentaries. In Granada, he continued to flourish as a mentor to young novices and as a spiritual director to older friars and nuns who were eager to draw closer to God.

During the latter years of John's life, he found himself immersed in new internal controversies with those who had different visions of the focus of reform. In 1590, these political tensions led him to fall out with the new leader who was heading the reform in Spain, Father Doria. The following year, at their General Chapter meeting in Madrid, the reformed Carmelites decided to send John to Mexico as a punishment—but that journey would never take place.

At the end of the summer of 1591, John became increasingly unwell and was taken to the convent in Úbeda (Jaén). The next few months would be a great test of personal endurance for the fragile priest. As he approached the end of his life, he had to suffer not only the pain of a terminal illness but

also the inhumane treatment of Father Crisóstomo, the prior of the convent. John was allocated the worst cell in the house and kept in isolation from the rest of the friars who wanted to keep him company, following the prior's command. He was poorly fed and treated in the most unhygienic ways, dirty bandages being used while his body was increasingly covered by more and more tumours and ulcers. John's body gave up on 14 December. Towards the end, on his deathbed, he asked one of the friars standing by to read some verses from Song of Songs, his favourite book of the Bible. He was now ready for his final journey, to be warmly embraced by his God, fully transformed by the Beloved.

The mystic and the poet

Nowadays, John of the Cross is regarded by many primarily as a great poet and writer. In fact, he is still considered by many scholars as the finest poet of Spanish Golden Age literature (16th–17th centuries). Many books have been written providing helpful literary and linguistic studies of his poetry, shedding light on the intricate meaning of some of his most obscure texts.

However, John's poetry, as we have already seen, was a channel that pointed to a higher and deeper reality—that of God's work and presence in his life. In this sense, his poetry expresses a living faith and a spiritual journey—one that at times is full of longing, because of an experience of God's absence, and at other times full of the most wonderful shouts of joy, out of a deep encounter with Christ. His poetry is born out of his mystical experience. John is a mystic first and a poet second.

Some people think of mystics, and, by extension, of John

of the Cross, as solitary people who live in a permanent state of spiritual ecstasy, praying in their cells and absorbed in deep contemplation, or levitating with their robes floating in the air. This was not John's experience, certainly not most of the time. He was a very ordinary man who faced many challenges in his life, got his hands dirty with manual labour and endured great hardship and physical and emotional pain.

John, in the tradition of all good monastic spirituality, found it impossible to separate his spiritual life from the more practical aspects of his existence. His was a holistic spirituality that impacted everything that he did and every aspect of his identity. So he was able to make compatible his love for nature with his love for God, and his role as a leader and reformer of the Carmelite order with his job of project-managing building restorations, building walls and landscaping gardens. All of these practical tasks reflected what God was doing in his life, restoring and landscaping his soul, and also what he, as a mentor and spiritual director, could encourage in the lives of the young novices who joined his community.

One of the most significant aspects of mystical spirituality, in John's context, was its accessibility to people of all backgrounds. At a time when the main emphasis was placed on intellectual spirituality (you had to be a learned person to understand the things of God), John and Teresa modelled a new kind of spirituality, rooted in an experiential, prayerful and sacramental life. Anyone who was serious enough about their walk with God could experience God's reality, his love and his power.⁵

This was the path of spiritual formation chosen by John, one that focused on having a deeper, more experiential, ultimately transformational relationship with God. The mystics

believed that the God in whom ‘we live and move and have our being’, to quote Paul’s words to the people of Athens (Acts 17:28), can be found deep within us. The journey that San Juan invites us to follow is an inner journey, through which we become more aware of who we are and more aware of who God is. This is a journey of discovery and transformation, in which we become more and more the person we were created to be, achieving our full human potential, as we set our eyes above, on Christ, yet keep our feet on the ground.

For prayer and reflection

Reflect on your own life journey. You may find it helpful to draw a timeline on paper and identify some of the big turning points in your life. These could be changes or transitions connected with moving school, moving home, or experiencing a positive or negative event in your life.

These turning points are part of your story, and many of them will have helped to shape you into the person you are. Take some time to offer them to God in prayer.

You may also find it helpful to think of two or three individuals who have had a positive impact on your life. How did they touch your life? What did you learn from them? Take some time to thank God for their lives and for what they mean or meant to you.

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The 16th-century Spanish mystic John of the Cross is best-known for his reflections on 'the dark night of the soul', as well as his friendship and collaboration with Teresa of Avila to reform the religious communities of their day. This book explores the dramatic events of his life and times, and also his complex and lyrical poetry, showing how all his work pointed to the reality of God's work through him and presence with him, even in the despair of a prison cell.

Transformed by the Beloved invites us to reflect on different aspects of the Christian journey, all of which John considered crucial for growth in faith and depth of spirituality. John's own experience showed this journey to be at times full of longing, because of an experience of God's absence, and at other times full of the most wonderful shouts of joy, because of a profound encounter with Christ. Each chapter ends with suggestions for personal reflection and prayer, with many links to John's poems, new translations of which are included in the book.

An Anglican priest and theologian, Daniel Muñoz is chaplain to the Los Olivos retreat centre in the heart of the Sierra Nevada National Park in Spain (www.haciendalosolivros.org). He oversees the spiritual and artistic life of the centre, as well as the yearly programme of retreats and courses. Previously he served as a priest in the Diocese of Oxford for nine years, where he was involved in leading art and spirituality projects.

'Here we can encounter the gentle, transformative power of St John's verse and vision.'

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