

St. John of the Cross

After the door of St. Ann's Monastery at Medina del Campo had been closed for the night, at the end of a dreary autumnal day in 1650, the monks gathered for Compline in the chapel were surprised by the redoubled striking of the great knocker at the gate. The porter, after finding his way across the court by the light of his lantern, peered through the wicket at a youth whose ragged discolored garments were in almost comical contrast with his refined and delicate features. Neither the old lay-brother who judged by externals, nor the youth, in his humility, had any suspicion that one day John d'Yezpez, entering now into the Carmelite Order, would become the powerful assistant of St. Theresa in the reformation of that glorious division of the Church's army.

Born in 1542 of Spanish parents, in the town of Fontiberius, near the city of Avila, John, from his earliest years, was noted for his love of retirement and tender devotion to Our Blessed Lady, a devotion which became all-absorbing as the years flew by, filling our saint with a longing to become a priest and devote his life to Our Lady's service. The extreme poverty of his parents, far from promoting these wishes, seemed to destine him

to a life spent in their aid, while his father's untimely death made his duty of supporting his mother all the more imperious. A classical education being now out of the question, John went to work in a hospital. Our Lady, it would seem, was still watching over this child of her choice, for here John became acquainted with the virtuous Alphonsus Alvarez, a man who was devoting life and fortune to the service of the poor. This pious servant of God, pleased with his young assistant, sent him to Avila to begin his studies for the priesthood.

Enters Monastery.

When the time came to choose between the secular and the religious clergy, John's great love of retirement and his special devotion to the Mother of God, determined him to enter the Carmelite monastery at Medina where we have seen him clad in the poor garments of a pilgrim begging admission. Sent to Salamanca for his studies, he passed through them in obedience, humility, fervor, and love of the Cross. He was ordained there, and in a few years was called to a task possible only to one who depended for all on God's help.

At that time St. Theresa had undertaken

by God's inspiration the reform of Carmel. During a visit to Medina, she made choice of John to aid in the great work as reformer of the monasteries for men. A small house was purchased in the neighboring village of Durvelle, where he retired and where he was soon followed by many fellow religious. Led by the example and exhortations of their holy abbot, these monks sought peace in retirement, humility, and austerity, endeavoring daily to model themselves on Jesus Crucified. But God was to begin to purify the heart of His servant from the least stain of earth, and many bitter trials, interior as well as exterior, were now to be his lot.

Having recognised his great qualities displayed in the government of the small monastery at Durvelle, St. Theresa sent him in 1576 to begin the reform of the convent at Avila. Here by his advice, and especially by his holy example, he soon induced the majority of the monks to take up again the life of solitude and penance which they had once vowed to God and had forgotten. He met, however, such great opposition that in a chapter of the Order, held at Placentia, he was condemned as an apostate and imprisoned for nine months at Toledo. Released through the influence of St. Theresa, he soon was wholly exculpated.

The highest charges in the Order were in

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