

Saint Teresa of Avila and Saint John of the Cross: An Introduction and personal reflections by Zach Abbey

As our Ananda Sangha starts looking forward to another pilgrimage opportunity in the spring of 2020, this time to Italy and the Spain, it occurred to me that while most all pilgrims will already, and understandably, have a great deal of reverence and love for Saint Francis of Assisi ('the main attraction' you might say), most likely not everyone is as familiar with the other Saints whose footsteps we seek to walk in: Saint Teresa of Avila and San Juan De la Cruz, whose incorruptible body is interred at the monastery he founded in Segovia.

For my wife Hailey and myself, the opportunity to visit these sacred sites again is not something we can take for granted. Even in the remembrances of how we first came to visit Spain just few years ago lies a divine memory that will forever link the 3 saints of our pilgrimage - Francis, Teresa and John - in my own heart and mind.

A Divine Robber in Rome

In the summer of 2016, we had the great blessing of visiting Italy the first time. The Portiuncula, San Damiano, La Verna and more, steeped in the vibration of beloved Saint Francis of Assisi. It was at the very beginning of this trip that a remarkable event occurred.

Hailey, myself and two friends were picked up from the Rome airport by a friend, on a beautiful, warm afternoon. The driver took us into Rome proper to enjoy the sites, and even dropped us off on a corner near the Vatican. He pointed us in the right direction, with instruction to meet back again at the same corner in some amount of time. Familiar with the city, he was going to circle it while we enjoyed this moment of basking. After some few minutes of walking towards the main plaza of the Vatican, we were surprised and happy to see our driver approaching us on foot. He had found a parking spot and was able to join in the fun.

Shortly after, we followed him back to the van in good spirits, to begin our drive to Assisi. We were quite surprised then, to arrive at the van and find it now empty. All of our collective possessions, clothes, laptops, everything, gone. Quite a shock it was! For Hailey and myself, even our passports.

Once the surprise subsided as best it could, we did our best to file a police report (no easy task in Rome we would find out!), and then got the heck out of dodge. It seems like we were in quite a daze at that point. I'm not totally clear. Which probably means that at least I was! But, as we drove through the countryside, and then began climbing up that magnificent city on the hill, it occurred to

me, 'I am going to Assisi, home of Francis and the Vow of Poverty, with only the clothes on my back.' No bags. And I was beginning to suspect, a lot less 'baggage' too.

What an interesting thought to think Francis had a hand in this, helping four young devotees with their own vows of poverty, or at the least, testing our pilgrim-merit! Naive, maybe, to think Francis had a hand here; how many thousands of tourist passports and luggage are stolen each year in that ancient city of Ceasar? But certainly, there are no accidents.

We arrived that evening at Ananda Assisi to friends and laughter; offers of toothbrushes and clothes, and even other people's underwear. Somehow it was perfect in that moment, to have nothing of our own. Like Francis's blessing was upon us: To know the Vow of Poverty, and the actual abundance of spirit which it entails.

After a most memorable stay in Italy, including a trip back to Rome for the US embassy, we returned state-side, in-Joy. Amazingly, Hailey had purchased travel insurance when she bought our flights. Without totally realizing what that meant, we submitted a claim, along with the scribbled police report we filed in Rome on that fateful day. Weeks later when we heard back from the insurance company, they agreed to pay \$1000 to each of us, giving us renunciate farmers an unexpected \$2000 profit at the end of our pilgrimage to Italy. You can imagine our delight!

Shortly thereafter, the dear friends who had coordinated the incredible summer convocation in Italy invited us to visit them in Spain the coming winter. Though I had begun my travels skeptical that any self-respecting farmer would dare to leave the farm in the middle of summer to travel to Europe, I had now realized that the Italy trip had tangibly changed my life, for the better.

Maybe you can also attest, then, that when someone you know helps you to realize possibilities in your life that you had never before thought possible, it's best to listen to them when they make another suggestion as well!

It almost goes without saying then, but we did go to Spain that Winter, and we used the insurance money from Francis, via a Divine Robber in Rome, to buy our tickets, that otherwise we could never afford.

Teresa and John

To think that Francis conspired in someway to help us visit Spain might be crazy, but it's how I feel things to have happened. If the mere thought brings me closer in feeling to the Saints themselves, why not believe it. So I do.

It was here in Spain, and more specifically in Avila, and Segovia, that I began my own quest to know who these 'saints' were. There are, after all, some thousands of Catholic saints. Were these truly unique, or helpful to my own path in life?

Prior, they had been names in books, written of with reverence, but with no personal connection *in myself*. But since, they have become tangible, living inspirations in my life.

Here are some of things I've learned about them in this process, though admittedly, through the filter of my own memory and understanding.

Saint Teresa de Jesus

Saint Teresa and John of the Cross incarnated at the same time; well pretty close to the same time, in the 1500s of medieval Spain. Teresa though, was nearly 30 years John's elder. When she was in her early 50's, and established as the powerhouse reformer of the Carmelite order of Spain, John arrived as a small, homely, yet mighty monk around 26 years old. Teresa spoke of her first meeting John and his brother friar, upon which they offered their efforts and service to the reform that she was leading, as "1 and a half men." John, in his tiny stature, was the half.

And yet, Teresa recognized John beyond the form he walked in on earth. Their relationship was special. He became the confessor and spiritual director for her and her 'daughters' at the convent in Avila; around 150 of them.

Bare in mind, he was a child compared to Teresa herself. And yet, in the convent cells of Avila that still stand today, Teresa's quote resides on the wall: "I cannot be in the presence of John without being lifted up into the presence of God." In each other, they found God's friendship and company.

For Teresa, John was nothing short of a God-send. Though Teresa's reform of the Carmelite order of Convents in Spain was well under way, it was John who could now lead the reform of the monasteries as well.

What exactly was this reform? It was the 1500's, some 3 centuries after the coming of Saint Francis in neighboring Italy. And whereas the incredible inspiration and devotion Francis had awakened in his time were alive in the spirit of a few, they were already outwardly forgotten in much of the Catholic world and especially so in Spain.

At the time Teresa entered the carmelite convent, she was only a young girl, and yet was a soul in between two worlds. On one hand, beautiful and desirous of her place in the world, and on the other, on her sick bed for great length at a time while undergoing deep spiritual experiences within. On one hand, in a place of constant communion with God in her convent cell, and on the other, stuck in the muck of convent protocol, meeting and greeting with the wealthy male suitors of Avila in the parlor; gossiping, flirting, and moving away from her upstairs loft, where she was so often lifted into the actual living presence of the Christ.

It was one fateful day indeed, when she came down from her upstairs cell into the parlor to meet with a beau of her desire, and was shocked to witness Christ in the form, standing directly over the man's shoulder. Only, He refused to make eye contact with her. Devastating blow to the little self of old. It was enough to help her decide who her true love was, and to provide the resolve to begin the reform, of herself!

She would spend the next many decades helping the receptive nuns of a carmelite order in Spain to reform their lives as well; to simplify their lifestyles in the same spirit which Francis had brought to Italy, by owning nothing; by giving all to God. There was a renewed emphasis on self-sufficiency in lieu of dependence on the world. Even today the walnuts and hazelnuts from trees Theresa planted are available at the convent, as are countless beautiful hand-embroideries made by the nuns. The reformed order later became known as the *discalced* carmelite order, meaning, without shoes. They were barefoot.

They also abandoned the practice of meeting with the males in the downstairs parlor of their convents, of indulging altogether in the ways of the world. And to live rather, in the upstairs of the house of God, cloistered in the presence of Christ within, while realizing community with each other in their soul's aspiration for God.

Theresa founded nearly a dozen new carmelite convents throughout Spain, against incredible persecution and even great periods of self-doubt. But always, she carried on, by reforming herself, and following the Divine Will. This brought many disciples, to whom she became simply, La Madre. The Mother.

She tirelessly traveled Spain to be with her daughters and to found new convents, all the way until the end of her life - which, like the rest of her life, was met with incredible pain and sickness outwardly, and incredible ecstasy and Communion, inwardly.

Saint John of the Cross

John's arrival on the scene didn't come without its own incredible implications. John had come to lead the other half up the mountain: the Brothers. But not without his own challenges and triumphs along the way.

The reform itself was not exactly welcomed with open arms. How easy it is for any of us to change the way we live our lives? For those living in the convents and monasteries of the time, the reform was a direct assault on their way of life. Much as the institutions of the day (and even his own brothers) had resisted Saint Francis' "Vow of Poverty", similar forces tried their best to destroy any effort to change things as they had come to be, in the ways of the world.

This reached a boiling point, when the oppositional forces to Teresa and John's efforts, kidnapped and imprisoned him in a neighboring monastery; Starved, and even lashed him in public. John felt betrayed; even to the point of complete emptiness. Where had his friend and beloved gone? Yet, in the same cell of his monastic prison in Toledo, John would come to know peace and the presence of his Beloved in ways before, unimagined. He recorded *The Spiritual Canticle*, over 30 stanzas depicting the individual soul as bridegroom, searching everywhere for her husband, El Amado, the Beloved. Ultimately, to be reunited in the 'solitude of the garden', in the state of perfect Union.

After 9 months, God came to him, and told him how to escape his cell; and even gave him the strength to bend his prison cell bars to do so. He climbed down from an upper floor, using the blankets tied together, dropping him onto a bush, and then following a dog through a drainage pipe. He knew his freedom whence he arrived at the doorsteps of a convent of a newly barefoot-ed order of Saint Teresa de Jesus.

Much as Teresa traveled tirelessly to be with her daughters throughout Spain, one biography estimates that John traveled nearly 18,000 miles throughout Spain, mostly on foot. While living the inner life of a deep Yogi, outwardly John filled all the roles required of him in founding new monasteries and leading his brothers. He lead the brother friars into their work in the orchards and gardens, helped them find communion in Nature and in the chapel, and even designed aqueducts for monasteries, one of which still stands in Spain today. His knowledge both transcended this world, and embraced it.

John would go on to become one of the foremost poets of the Spanish language; his poems, though, were always about the Soul's journey home. He wrote of the Dark Night of the Soul, and the universal ascent up Mount Carmel. Taking the path of nothingness, up the river of life, through the cave of darkness, into the eternal flame, arriving finally, at the top of the mountain - *todo una fiesta*. Everything is a party. *Eterno Con Vito* - Eternal with Life.

Saint Teresa and Saint John were no ordinary 'saints' of the church. For their saintliness, goes far beyond the religion of any church, and lives rather in the eternal religion of all Life. Their partnership as well, was one for the ages; not brought about by a human friendship, but rather, a karmic link and dharmic duty, inspired by two souls reformed within themselves to the abundance of Love and Joy in God.

Segovia, Spain

Amazing it was, to arrive at Saint John's monastery on a frigid but sunny January day in 2017, and to find the church literally filled with light. White walls, windows of sunlight, and an incredible altar mural at the front of the church, reminding one instantaneously of the chakras; the inner path. This is no ordinary catholic church! It is alive, still today.

A phone call to a head friar granted permission to walk the monastery grounds. Massive, fertile gardens in the bottom land, fed from above by the vast, terraced hillsides and cliffs overlooking the ancient city scape of Segovia. Stunning beyond words. Climbing the slopes, countless benches interspersed with endless orchard; a meditation cave, chapels, seemingly endless sacred space, interspersed with gardens and trees. An integration of simple living, and high spiritual aspirations, of the highest order. Here was the monastery of San Juan De La Cruz, known only as a name in my mind just weeks before, thrilling me to my core.

Atop the cliff, at the edge of the ancient city wall circling the city, overlooking the grounds, in absolute awe, gazing out at the city, and up into the vast blue sky, which somehow merged perfectly in the flight of the birds above and below my perch.

The only words I could say, I had to sing. I am the Sky Mother; I am the Sky.

Considering their importance today

Visiting Segovia and Avila awakened in me anew the realization that the lives of all true Saints, though gone in the outward form of this earth, live on well beyond their earthly departure. The living examples of their disciples, the inspiration of their words, and the vibration of their very presence.

The world itself is a strange place. We've traveled a long way in the last almost 500 years, since John and Teresa walked the earth; but sometimes it's hard to know if those travels have even been in the right direction. One can't help but feel sometimes, that the more we think we've advanced in our knowing of how

to live in this world, the further we've gotten from the Source of life itself. Are we truly wealthy? Are we truly happy?

What Teresa and John revealed to their brothers and sisters of Spain - was the same spirit that Francis inspired in his brothers and sisters in Italy: We needn't pursue the ways of the world, to know the Creator of it.

As individuals, we own nothing. Call it the vow of poverty, or simplicity. Born of the inner knowing that all belongs to God, and All is God.

Paramhansa Yogananda came in the 20th century with this same message, applied anew for an evolving future humanity: *To be in this world, but not of it.* To embrace this world in our hearts, but not settle our aspirations and life-purpose for the passing trends and fancies of the day.

John, Teresa, and Francis brought to the world a timeless way of life; of brotherhood and community; of deep connection with Nature and Creation; and of deep commitment to the human soul's aspiration to return to the Creator Himself.

May we walk in the footsteps of these saints in pilgrimage, and soar in their spirit within, that we too may be inspired to reform the only person we ever can: our very own self.