

Readings: 1 Corinthians 2: 1 – 10; Ps 36 (37): 3 – 6, 30,31; Luke 14: 25 – 33.

Saint John was born in 1542 in Old Castile in Spain. His father, whose family had been wealthy but had been disowned for marrying a poor girl, died when John was about a year old. His widow and children were very poor, and life was hard. John was sent to an orphanage, and when he was fourteen he was apprenticed in three different trades, but had no skill in any of them. At last he became a nursing assistant in a hospital and showed great compassion in caring for the sick. When he was seventeen the administrator sent him to a Jesuit College. There he developed a vocation to the religious life and was professed as a Carmelite friar. He spent four years studying theology and in 1567 was ordained priest in his hometown, with his mother present.

There he met the Carmelite sister Teresa, who in her mid-forties had founded a new Carmelite house in Avila under the patronage of S. Joseph. Her intention was to return to a strict observance of the rule, which was widely neglected by many religious communities in Spain. John agreed to join Teresa in her reformed community (known as discalced because they wore no shoes) and he took the name Juan de la Cruz – John of the Cross.

The unreformed Carmelites became increasingly hostile to the Discalced, and, although Teresa had the protection of King Philip II, John did not. In 1575 he was captured and imprisoned. He was released the next year, and in the winter of 1577 captured again and imprisoned in the priory of Toledo. He spent eight and a half months in solitary confinement, unwashed, ill-fed and regularly flogged to make him abandon the reform. It was during this time that he wrote much of his poetry. In August 1578 he escaped and found his way to the local house of Discalced Carmelite sisters. When the friars and police came looking for him the prioress refused to let them in. The next morning he was rescued by a supportive priest and taken to another Discalced priory.

Soon after this the two branches of the Carmelite order were formally separated, and John played a part in setting up new priories. But towards the end of his life he was deprived of his offices by the Discalced Carmelite vicar-general and banished to southern Spain where he died in 1591. He was canonized in 1726 and declared a Doctor of the Church in 1926. It would require another Reflection to speak adequately of Saint John's teaching on the life of prayer.