



SUPERIOR GENERAL OF DISCALCED CARMELITES
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WHAT THE BELL TOLLS FOR?

Letter to the whole Order on the feast of St. John of the Cross

Rome, 14th of December 2022

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

HAPPY FEAST OF ST. JOHN OF THE CROSS!

What the bell tolls for?

John of the Cross was warned a minute before. Love had already awakened him and prepared him for Life. Love had already awakened him every step of the way. The whole life of John of the Cross was to die and let himself be awakened. He lost himself (I lost myself and was found, CB 29) and let himself be killed and pierced by the unknown and ever new Love of God without losing time in order to be won by Him. His intellect moved by the only reason that saves: the Truth of God, the Living Flame of His Love. John of the Cross was already dead to himself, to his own self and to his project, paving the way to the Beloved. He was ready to cross again, once more, the final frontier, and finally, the Night that leads to Life and Light.

That night John of the Cross was feverish, his body worn out, and his life consumed. It was the Hour. He was totally awake, without sorrow, to be called and interiorly warned. The house was ready, unburdened, no one was looking at him and the “the siege was calm” (CB 40). He lived in the desired eyes sketched deep in his being (CB 12). He was alert and dwelt in the unconditional and free love of those who do not tell God where the path leads. Bold explorer of the One path that saves us, the one that God desires and dreams for us in every step, in every stumble, in every failure, and in every success. Nothing mattered so much to John of the Cross as God’s desire.

He was 49 years old, the precise age for God to tear the veil of the sweet encounter. They had warned him a minute before, the Heart was already living in God's warning. The Songs of Love and of the Beloved were, in weakness, the direction that animated his wounded body and his surrendered spirit. There was no pending task. He was stripped and naked. He felt no regret, no longing; he had been giving himself away every step of the way and all of him belonged to the Beloved, light of baggage.

Death and life always come at an unexpected moment that we have not foreseen. The bell always tolls at the precise second calling for Life. They always ring for the same purpose: to live, to love, to wake up; always unpredictably and timely.

On night a long time ago, I slept in Úbeda and enjoyed praying with the brothers in the place where John of the Cross ended his days. For some years I have celebrated the vigil at his tomb in Segovia. I have prayed with the brothers and friends in the cold, close to the living flame that burns in John's chest as it is drawn on his icon and which reminds us of the truest loves in the darkest nights. We have lost a very dear brother or sister, perhaps a relative; for me, Father José Vicente Rodríguez, a great friend of John of the Cross. In the midst of the night and the cold, remembering that night of 13-14 December 1591, the poem by Martín Descalzo resonates with great truth:

*To die is only to die.
Dying is ending.
To die is a vanishing campfire.
It is to cross a drifting door
and finding what you so longed for.*

As I write this, on this grey ashen day, the bell of the neighboring church rings. What are they tolling for us today, now? What are they tolling in the Carmel of Teresa and John of the Cross all over the world and in every convent and community? What is the urgency in the last night of John of the Cross? What should we be born to in this now of our history?

John of the Cross always tolls...
To the Night, and in it the Light,
To the Ascent, and in it to let oneself be led by the Nothing, to the All,
To the Living Flame of Love, and in it to let ourselves be loved and to love the ashes of the present that enclose a burning ember,
To a Song that is born of absence and woundedness, and that ventures life in search of the Wounded Deer, of its desired Eyes in the depths of this present,

I thank God for our Nights, for the Ascents, for the Flame, and for the Canticle that is in the heart of each one of you in this time of Advent which reminds us that he will be born, in spite of us, precisely because of us, in this Carmel of ours which is our home, our wound and our passion. With so much to discover and so much to be born. After visiting some parts of the Order, in Africa, in France, in India, and in Italy, the word hope is born in me; the confidence that, indeed, something wants to bud forth.

I am remembering our brothers who have died more recently, whom we ask to bring us wisdom and encouragement. I also remember Fr. Federico Ruiz, a great scholar of John of the Cross who died like Jesus crucified, consumed to the bone after a very long illness. Some of his words, so dense with wisdom about John, about union, the passion for God, what is worthwhile, and about the urgencies of the present for us, continue to resonate within me with much gratitude for his life and for so many brothers and sisters who have passed on:

In John of the Cross the union of love is not only the goal, but also the beginning, and furthermore the impulse and guide of the journey. We must always begin, continue, and end with union if we want to respect his rhythm of life and understand his line of thought. Union with God is totality of life and mutual self-giving, vehement communion. Union of love means: God's passion for humanity and humanity's passion for God...

This is John of the Cross alive and in person. After his death, he received great honors: mystic, doctor, poet, saint, writer and theologian. Well-deserved titles

painstakingly won. However, I still see the living Friar John of the Cross, without academic titles and without canonization whose genius is hidden and unconscious. He lives among his brothers as a Christian and as a contemplative Carmelite, doing a bit of everything. In his spare time, he also writes. John of the Cross is a simple, good, courageous, sensitive, intelligent, and deeply religious man. (Federico Ruiz, Mistico y Maestro).

We are very privileged to have John of the Cross, the first Discalced Carmelite with Friar Antonio de Jesús. We are very fortunate to be living this unique and difficult moment, fruitful according to the ways and manners of God. Like our saints and our brothers already on the other shore, we, too, are invited to listen to the bell that tolls for New Life, awake and attentive to what is important at the right time, without giving in to the temptation of discouragement. With Mary, our sister and companion on this journey, and woman of the YES to the impossible, I embrace you. On this path of rekindling the Living Flame of Love, without reserving anything for ourselves, I trust in a Carmel full of the freshness of the origins, detached from itself, obedient and listening, not self-sufficient, not possessed by the truth, humble and on the way, a Carmel that makes the journey with the poor and allows itself to be advised and encouraged by them and by all, in real and practical Synodality, a Carmel that is able to arrive at John's experience in the midst of persecution and extreme difficulty, and say: "Now that my every act is love" (CB 28). We do not want anything else, and time is pressing. I invite the whole Order to embark on the path of this experience of being men and women of ONE LOVE, listening to the heartbeat of Jesus in Mary's womb, and adapting our life to its rhythm. It is not a time to bind ourselves to our whims or our plans, but to the plan that is listened to with humility, obeying the Spirit with courage and audacity. Let us listen to ourselves in silence; let us listen to our brothers and sisters in community; let us listen to the Church; let us listen to the cry of the poor and the groaning of the world that speaks an urgent word to us and calls us to recover the "hidden source" as our first and essential task (*Declaration on the Charism*, n. 3).

Thank each and every one of you, my brothers and sisters, for living in the heart of this Advent the hope of John of the Cross without giving up, without letting anyone or anything rob you of joy.

A VERY HAPPY FEAST OF SAINT JOHN OF THE CROSS!



Fr Miguel Márquez Calle, OCD
Superior General

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "fr miguel" followed by a stylized flourish.