

# RETREAT PILGRIMAGE WITH ST JOHN OF THE CROSS

17–23 April 2026 • Spain

**“I return to Love”**

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**Day 4** Monday 20th April 2026

**From Ávila to Alba — Life received, life surrendered**

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In the warmth of the morning in Ávila, we gathered like the Apostles for the breaking of bread and the praise of God’s glory. There is something about the Eucharistic celebration on a pilgrimage that is different— not in its substance, which is always the same sacrifice, always the same Lord, but in the quality of attention it draws from the pilgrim. Away from routine, away from the familiar surroundings that can allow the mind to wander, the pilgrim comes to the altar already in motion, already searching, already a little more awake to what is being given.



## **The Arc of a Life**

Fr Kelvin powerfully drew out the symbolic importance of the day’s journey: from Ávila, the city of Teresa’s birth, to Alba de Tormes, the city of her death. In a single afternoon, we would trace the full span of a human life across the Spanish plain. Not as a historical exercise — but as a mirror.

Life, he reflected, *is what is received*. It arrives as gift — unearned, unasked for, spoken into existence by God. Ávila is where Teresa received her life: the baptismal water, the family home, the city that formed her imagination. Death, by contrast, *is that which is surrendered* — the total gift of the self back to the Giver. Alba de Tormes is where Teresa surrendered hers: quietly, completely, murmuring the words of the Psalmist: ‘A contrite and humble heart, O God, you will not spurn.’

This, he said, is the constant invitation of the spiritual life. Not a single dramatic moment of surrender, but the daily practice of loosening the grip on what we have been given — on consolations, on certainties, on the image of God we have constructed for our own comfort. The Lord invites each of us to purify the desires with which we seek him, until the seeking has a single gaze. As the first

reading described Stephen: his face, before the Sanhedrin, like the face of an angel. Not divided. Not deflected. Simply: directed.

*“Life is what is received; death is that which is surrendered. This is the constant invitation for us all.” — Fr Kelvin of Jesus OCD, homily, Ávila, 20 April 2026*

### **Alba de Tormes — Providence Opens the Door**

With this reflection resting in our hearts we set out to Alba de Tormes, some ninety kilometres east of Ávila across the rolling Castilian plain. Alba is a quieter, less dramatic city than Ávila — without the great walls and towers, without the imposing silhouette. It is a city that did not announce itself as the place of Teresa’s death. She did not choose it. She arrived there worn out, barely able to stand, returning from her last and most exhausting foundation at Burgos, and her body simply stopped. She took to her bed and did not rise.

We arrived to find everything closed — it being a Monday, and Monday, according to human arrangement, being the day things are shut. But divine providence, as it has a way of doing, had a different arrangement. A sister appeared. She saw us. She smiled. And she threw the doors open with the warmth of an invitation that seemed less like hospitality and more like recognition — as though she had been expecting us, as though the saint whose house this is had sent someone to welcome her pilgrims in.

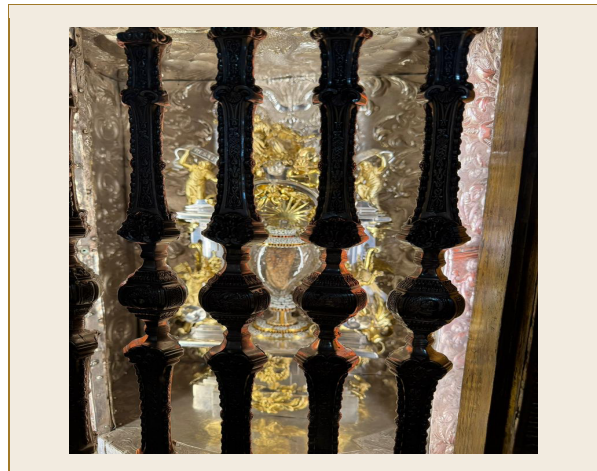
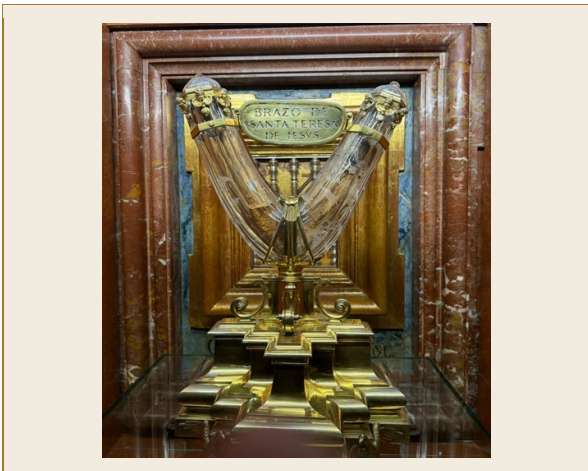


### **Sitting with Teresa — The Tomb and the Room**

We were invited to sit with Teresa in her tomb and in the very room where she died. There are moments on a pilgrimage that resist description — not because nothing is happening, but because what is happening is happening at a depth that words can only gesture toward. This was one of those moments. Each pilgrim was brought to a place of wonder.

Teresa’s heart is preserved in its reliquary in the church, incorrupt after more than four centuries, still bearing — the mystics attest — the wound of the Transverberation, the piercing by the angel’s flaming dart she had described in the *‘Life’* with such trembling precision. To stand before it is to stand before a life that was entirely consumed by love. Not in a single blaze — but in the long, patient,

sometimes agonising way that fire moves through wood: slowly, thoroughly, leaving nothing unconsumed.

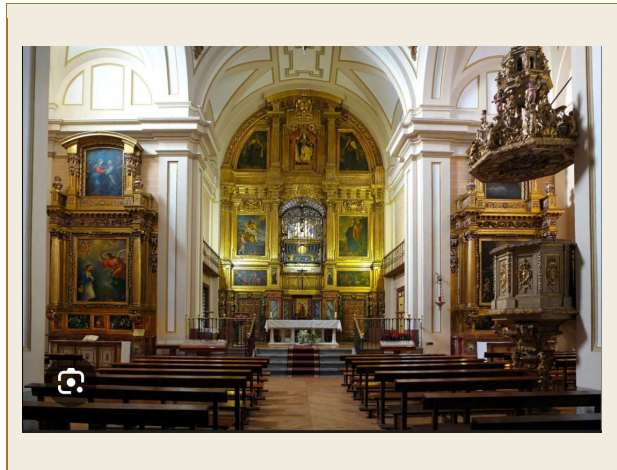


### **The Political Drama of a Saint's Body**

Fr Matt, in his characteristically masterful way, illuminated the remarkable historical and political story that unfolded in the weeks after Teresa's death on 4 October 1582. The question of where a saint's body should rest was never merely a spiritual matter in sixteenth-century Spain — it was a matter of prestige, of civic honour, of competing claims.

Teresa had died in Alba, but Ávila — the city of her birth and her first foundation — wanted her body returned. And for a time, it was: her remains were taken to Ávila, where it seemed she would rest. But the Duke of Alba was not prepared to lose his city's prize so easily. Through a combination of influence, persistence, and the kind of determined advocacy that Teresa herself might have recognised with a wry smile, the Duke secured the return of her body to Alba de Tormes. And here she has remained — her body in the church, her heart beside it, the two cities forever bound together by the arc of a single life.

*"God alone suffices." — St Teresa of Jesus, bookmark found in her breviary after her death*

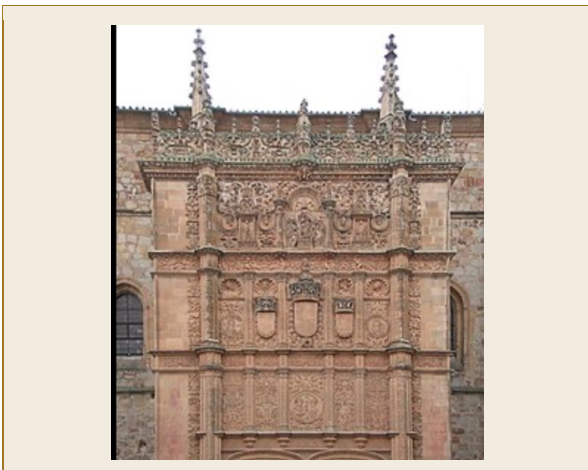


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### **Salamanca — The City of Learning**

From Alba de Tormes we proceeded to Salamanca, the city of learning, one of the great university cities of Europe. This was not a detour — it was a deepening. Salamanca is where John of the Cross completed his theological formation, where the young Carmelite friar from poverty in Fontiveros encountered the finest theological minds of his age and was sharpened by them. It is impossible to understand the precision of John’s mystical language — the exactness with which he distinguishes between different kinds of *night*, different faculties of the soul, different modes of *divine communication* — without knowing that he was formed here, in one of the great schools of Scholastic theology.

We witnessed firsthand the power of this place of learning: the extraordinary façade of the university, carved with the patient ambition of those who believed that the pursuit of knowledge and the pursuit of God were not in competition but in conversation; the Plaza Mayor, that great stage of civic life where the centuries seem to fold into one another; the golden stone of the city in the afternoon light. John walked these streets. He argued in these lecture halls. He was formed here for an encounter, in Medina, with a woman who would change everything.



### **Return to Ávila — Sweetness, Wonder and Celebration**

In rejoicing we returned to Ávila as the evening gathered, to savour the sweetness of a day that had been filled with blessings, wonder and love. We had set out from the place of Teresa's birth and visited the place of her death. We had stood at the tomb of a woman who had given everything and found that God gave everything in return. We had walked in the footsteps of John in Salamanca. And we had been met, in Alba de Tormes, by a grace that human arrangement had not planned for: a sister with a smile and open doors.

Our evening ended in praise — and, for the second night running, in birthday celebration. The table became an altar of a different kind: the kind where laughter and gratitude and the sheer goodness of being together are themselves a form of worship.

