

RETREAT PILGRIMAGE WITH ST JOHN OF THE CROSS

17–23 April 2026 • Spain

“I return to Love”

Day 7 *Thursday 23rd April 2026*

The End that is a Beginning — Toledo to Madrid

Every pilgrimage that is worthy of the name arrives at the last, at a moment it cannot fully account for. Seven days. Seven cities. Seven mornings of prayer and seven tables of bread broken and seven evenings in which something shifted, quietly, in the interior landscape of each one who walked this road. And now the seventh morning in Toledo — a city that had given us more than we had come to ask for — and the last gathering of this community before the world drew them back toward their separate lives.

It is the right word: divine wandering. Not a planned itinerary of spiritual achievements but a responsive, attentive moving through space and time in the company of a God who, as John of the Cross insists, is always already ahead of us on the road, having already left his trace in the passing, waiting to be recognised in the thousand forms he takes in creation, in encounter, in the unexpected open door.

The Last Breaking of Bread

We gathered for the breaking of bread in thanksgiving. It is the right description: thanksgiving, not conclusion. What had taken place over seven days could not be concluded. It could only be offered back to the God from whom it had come, with gratitude that such things are possible, that the world still contains places where a prison cell can become a poem and a tomb can become an open door and a road across Castile can become a mirror of the soul's journey toward its God.

And God, in his extraordinary providence, gave to this final morning the perfect reading in the liturgy. Not a reading chosen by the pilgrimage directors. Not a text selected for its thematic appropriateness. Simply the reading assigned for this Thursday in the Third Week of Easter: Acts 8, Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch. A man who had made his pilgrimage to Jerusalem and was now returning home, sitting in his chariot, reading a text he could not fully understand, his heart burning with something he had no language for yet.

“How can I understand, unless someone guides me?” — Acts 8:31

Fr Kelvin received this gift of the liturgy and held it up for the pilgrims with great power. He aligned the Ethiopian's moment — pilgrimage completed, chariot turned homeward, scripture open on his knees, a stranger running alongside — to the present moment of each person in that eucharist. We too had made our journey to Jerusalem. We too were in the chariot, turning for home. We too had been reading — reading the stones of Ávila and the cells of Toledo and the tomb of John and the poems born in darkness — and had not always understood what we were reading.

But he took the question further than Philip had taken it. Philip asked: ‘Do you understand what you are reading?’ Fr Kelvin pressed deeper: ‘Do you understand what your life is saying? Do you understand what God is inscribing about your story?’

“Do you understand what you are reading?” But deeper still: “Do you understand what your life is saying? What God is inscribing about your story?” — Fr Kelvin of Jesus OCD, homily, Toledo, 23 April 2026

Each day of this pilgrimage, he said, had been a unique divine inscription. Not a lesson to be memorised and recited but a word written directly into the life of each pilgrim by a God who does not speak in generalities but in the precise, unrepeatable particularity of each human story. What we had read about John of the Cross this week was not what John wrote about himself. It was what John understood God to be writing about him. The poems are not autobiography. They are the soul’s attempt to read, the text God was inscribing in the dark.

And the invitation, carried home in the chariot, is this: to keep reading. To keep asking what each day holds as divine inscription. To resist the temptation to close the scroll simply because the formal pilgrimage has ended. The road from Jerusalem to Gaza does not end at the waterhole where Philip baptised. It continues. And the Ethiopian went away rejoicing.

After Breakfast — The Session of Burning Hearts

The Mass had lit something that did not want to be extinguished. After breakfast, the pilgrims gathered once more. Questions multiplied. Reflections opened into further reflections. There was a longing for more — not more places to visit or more content to receive, but a deeper tasting of the life that God had written in St John of the Cross and was writing, day by inscribed day, in each of them.

Fr Matt opened himself to the questions that came. About the dark night, about prayer in aridity, about what it means to return home from a pilgrimage without losing what the pilgrimage gave. About John’s God, who is not distant but is often silent, and who uses that silence not as abandonment but as the very medium through which transformation occurs. About Teresa, who danced and prayed and argued and founded and suffered and found, at the end, that *God alone suffices*.

Gratitude — The Pilgrims Speak

Then came a moment that none of the directors had scripted and none would easily forget. The pilgrims, spoke their gratitude. Not the polite gratitude of a satisfied customer but the gratitude of people who had been given something they had not known they were looking for and could not fully articulate now that they had found it. They thanked Fr Matt for his depth of knowledge worn lightly, his ability to make the sixteenth century feel urgent and alive. They thanked Fr Savariyar for the quality of his pastoral accompaniment, his capacity to hold the theological and the personal together in a single homily, a single question, a single attentive silence. They thanked Fr Kelvin for the vision

and the care that had imagined this pilgrimage into existence and sustained it through every unexpected grace and difficulty.

It was the three directors giving themselves that had made the seven days what they were. Not the places — though the places were extraordinary. Not the logistics — though these had been managed with great care. But the quality of human presence brought to every moment: the willingness to pour out. John of the Cross would have recognised it. He who had poured himself out in a prison cell, in a confessional at the Incarnation, in the building of a cloister with his own hands, knew that the mystical life and the self-giving life are not two things but one.

*“Where there is no love, put love, and you will draw out love.” — St John of the Cross,
Letter to María de la Encarnación*

The Bittersweet Departure — A Community Takes Its Leave

And then, as it must, the moment of departure came. Bittersweet is the right word: bitter because what had been built over seven days could not be carried in its current form beyond the door, and sweet because it had been built at all. Contacts were exchanged. Friendships established. Photographs taken at the last possible moment. Small conversations that had been waiting all week finally found their time.

A community had been formed — not by decision or design but by the quiet alchemy that happens when people share sacred space and sacred time together. They had prayed at the same altars. They had stood at the same tomb and the same gorge and the same wall. They had heard the same homilies and asked the same questions and sat in the same silence. They had celebrated three birthdays. They had been moved by the same poem. A community of shared friendship in Christ — which is, in the end, the only community that endures.

Toledo to Madrid — The Chariot Turns for Home

We set out from Toledo to Madrid: the ancient capital to the modern one, the rock above the Tagus to the airport and the flight home. The coach carried people who were, in some quiet but real way, different from those who had landed seven days before. Not dramatically different. Not visibly transformed in the way that makes good conversion stories. But different in the way that matters: something had been inscribed. The writing was not yet fully legible — it rarely is, so soon after the event. But it was there.

As Luke recorded of the Ethiopian, so it could be said of each of them: he went on his way rejoicing. Not because the pilgrimage had answered all his questions — it had, if anything, generated more. Not because he had arrived at certainty — he had arrived, rather, at a deeper quality of openness. But because something had been given, and the giving had been recognised, and the recognition — however partial, however wordless — is the beginning of joy.

“And he went on his way rejoicing.” — Acts 8:39 “The end of this pilgrimage is not a conclusion — it is the beginning of a deeper reading.”

A Final Word

This pilgrimage was undertaken in celebration of St John of the Cross on the 300th anniversary of his Canonisation and the 100th anniversary of his proclamation as Doctor of the Church. It was, from the first morning at the Chapel of the Seven Mansions to the last Mass in Toledo, a pilgrimage in the truest sense: not a tour of holy places but an encounter with the holy Person who inhabits every place where love has been given, received, suffered, and transformed.

St John of the Cross spent his life teaching us that the journey inward and the journey toward God are the same journey, that the darkness through which that journey passes is not the absence of God but his most intimate presence, and that what emerges from the night — if we do not turn back, if we do not demand the light before its time — is always, always, more than we could have asked or imagined.

May each pilgrim continue to read what God is inscribing in their story. May the burning hearts that walked these roads continue to burn in the ordinary rooms they have returned to. And may the God who sought us, far more urgently than we ever sought him, complete in each of us the word he began to write long before we set out.