

RETREAT PILGRIMAGE WITH ST JOHN OF THE CROSS

17–23 April 2026 • Spain

“I return to Love”

Day 6 *Wednesday 22nd April 2026*

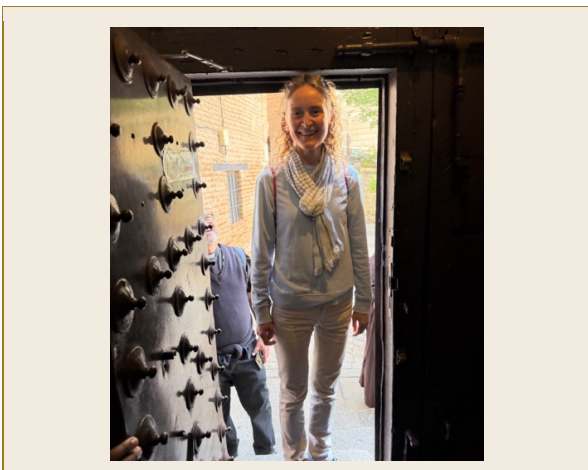
Toledo — Where Darkness Became Song

Toledo does not announce itself gently. It rises from the plain like something the earth has pushed upward out of reverence — a city on a rock, girdled on three sides by the deep curve of the River Tagus, crowned with towers and turrets and the weight of many centuries. To wake in Toledo is to wake inside history. And on this bright Wednesday morning, the city was generous: a luxurious breakfast first, nourishment for the body before the city made its great demands upon the spirit.

Toledo was once the capital of Spain — a city where three civilisations and different faiths had coexisted, sometimes in friction, sometimes in extraordinary creative synthesis: Christian, Jewish. Its streets carry all of this in their stones. Every alleyway turns to reveal something unexpected: a Mudéjar arch, a Gothic doorway, a synagogue converted and reconverted, a view that suddenly opens onto the river far below. For Teresa and John, Toledo was not merely a city. It was the stage on which some of the most dramatic scenes of their lives were played.

Into the City — Cathedral, Jewish Quarter and Teresa’s Fifth Foundation

We set out on foot up into the beauty of the old city, climbing through the narrow streets that John himself would have navigated. The great Cathedral of Toledo received us first — one of the supreme achievements of Spanish Gothic, a forest of stone and light whose interior seems to breathe with a life of its own. It is impossible to stand inside it and remain entirely within the ordinary world. The building itself is a form of theology: height as aspiration, light as revelation, stone as patience.

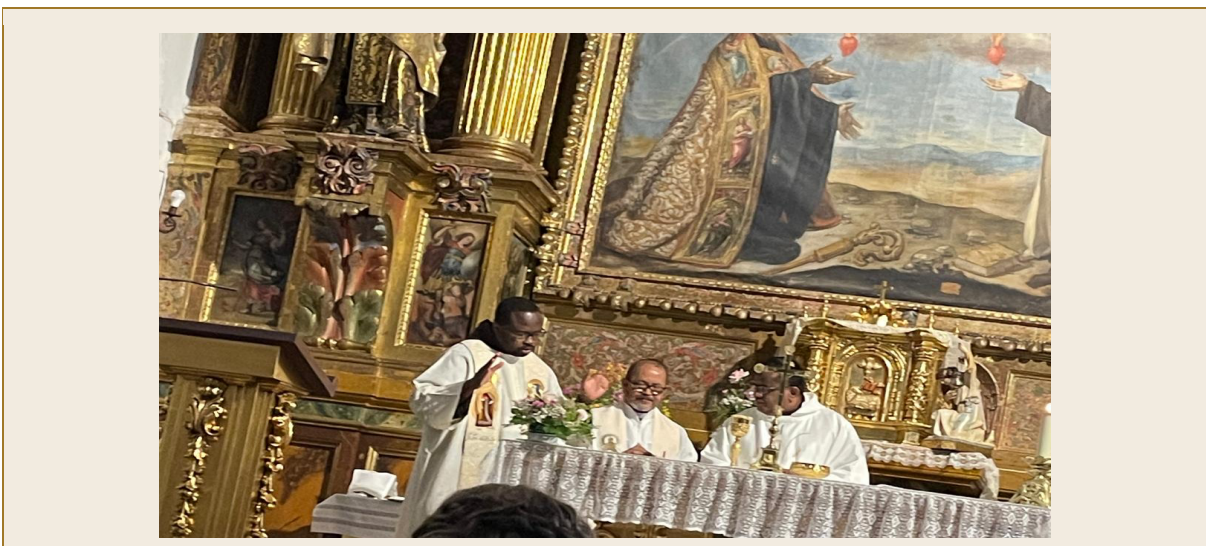


From the Cathedral we passed through the Jewish Quarter — those ancient streets where the three cultures of medieval Toledo had negotiated their long, difficult, sometimes glorious coexistence. The Quarter is narrow and labyrinthine, its walls leaning toward each other as though sharing a confidence. To walk through it is to be reminded that the spiritual adventure of Teresa and John did not take place in a vacuum of pure mysticism but in a world of enormous complexity: a Spain riven by questions of ‘limpieza de sangre’, by the long memory of expulsion and conversion, by the Inquisition’s watchful presence. Teresa herself carried converso blood. John grew up in poverty among the excluded. Their mysticism was not an escape from this world. It was formed inside it.



Teresa’s Fifth Foundation, Monastery of St Joseph

At the end of our ascent, the Monastery of St Joseph, Toledo — Teresa’s fifth foundation, established in 1569 — received us. There are Carmelite monasteries that announce themselves with grandeur. This is not one of them. The beauty of this house is the beauty of simplicity: clean lines, whitewashed walls, a silence that does not feel empty but inhabited and tended. Walking into it after the drama of the Cathedral and the complexity of the Jewish Quarter was like stepping from noise into the interior of a prayer. Every pilgrim felt it. Hearts were lifted, quietly and without effort, as though the place itself were doing the work.



We offered the sacrifice of the Eucharist here — in the chapel that has held this offering continuously for more than four and a half centuries. Fr Savariyar celebrated the Mass in honour of Blessed Mary of Jesus (María de Jesús), one of the most important figures of this house. Teresa herself received her into Carmel in 1577, when Maria was seventeen years old — received by the Foundress herself, in this city, in this monastery. Maria de Jesús lived here until her death in 1640, sixty-three years of enclosed Carmelite life, a great contemplative whose intense devotion to Jesus was often ignited by the liturgy itself. She is, in a very literal sense, a daughter of this place.

Blessed Mary of Jesus — A Hidden Life, an Incorrupt Witness

After Mass, we were brought to a moment of particular grace: the body of Blessed Mary of Jesus is still present in this chapel, incorrupt, a silent and luminous witness to the life she lived here. To pray beside the body of a blessed is not, in the Catholic tradition, a gothic curiosity. It is a theological statement. The body that was given to God in life has not been abandoned by God in death. It is held, still, in the same tender custody that held it through sixty-three years of prayer and enclosure.

She had been a novice when John of the Cross sought refuge with the nuns of this monastery after his escape from Toledo's prison. She knew him, had perhaps heard his first poems, had certainly prayed in the same space where he recovered. She is a living thread between the two great founding mystics and the continuous life of Carmel in this city.

“Patient and humble souls dwell in a supernatural peace and a most serene interior quiet.” — Blessed Mary of Jesus, Discalced Carmelite, Toledo

The Meaning of Dedication

In his homily, Fr Savariyar drew on the life of Blessed Mary of Jesus to open a question before all the pilgrims: what does it mean to be dedicated to God in service? Not the dedication of a single dramatic moment — a vow made in fervour, a pilgrimage undertaken in grace — but the dedication of the ordinary day repeated, year after year, decade after decade, until the dedication is no longer something you do but something you have become.

Maria de Jesús was seventeen when Teresa received her. She was eighty when she died. Between those two moments lay sixty-three years of the Liturgy of the Hours, of manual work, of silence broken only by necessity, of prayer that was not always consoling and was not always easy. She did not persist because it was comfortable. She persisted because she had given herself, and one does not take back what one has truly given.

Fr Savariyar invited the pilgrims to carry this question home: not ‘what great thing will I do for God?’ but ‘in what small, daily, unheroic way am I prepared to give myself, again, tomorrow?’ The monastery around us — its simplicity, its order, its peace — was the accumulated answer of one woman's sixty-three years.

Evening — Retracing the Escape of St John of the Cross

In the cool of the evening, we gathered to walk a path that is unlike any other we had walked on this pilgrimage. Not a path to a shrine or a tomb or a foundation. A path of escape. The path John of the

Cross took on the night of his flight from the Carmelite prison where he had been held for nine months.

The story is almost unbelievable. For nine months, John had been confined in a cell so narrow he could not stand upright, fed on bread and water, flogged as a public penance, denied any natural light except what entered through a narrow slit near the ceiling during certain hours. Yet it was precisely here, in this extremity, that God gave him the poems that would change the history of Christian mysticism. He memorised them in the darkness, recited them in whispers, entrusted them to scraps of paper brought by a sympathetic jailor.

On a dark August night in 1578, he made his escape. He lowered himself from a window by means of a rope made from his blankets and tunics. He was not certain where he was. He found himself on a wall above the city — and realised that below him was not a courtyard but the Tagus gorge. He had nearly fallen to his death. Instead he found a different path downward, made his way through a fence to a monastery of sisters and then to the monastery of the Discalced Carmelite nuns. The nuns hid him. The Calced friars searched the city. He was taken to the hospital, hidden as a patient, until he could be moved to safety.



We walked this route in the evening light. We stood at the wall above the gorge. We looked down at the Tagus, far below, and felt in our bodies what it would have been to lower oneself into darkness not knowing what lay beneath. The divine hand was visible here not in spite of the danger but through it: preserved at the edge of the abyss, guided in the dark, hidden in a hospital among the sick — the pattern John had already written in his poetry was being lived out in his flesh.

“I went out unseen, my house being now all stilled.” — St John of the Cross, “The Dark Night”, stanza 1

Fr Matt's Talk — An Introduction to the Poetry of John of the Cross

Having been moved by the drama of the escape, we gathered for something that complemented it perfectly: an introduction to the poetry of John of the Cross, offered by Fr Matt with the precision and warmth that characterise all his teaching.

Fr Matt opened for us the context in which the poems were born: not in a comfortable study with books and candlelight but in the stripped, sensory-deprived darkness of a prison cell. He unpacked the extraordinary literary achievement they represent: poetry of such technical mastery, such concentrated beauty, that Spanish literary critics place John among the greatest poets in the Spanish language — not merely as a mystic who happened to write verse, but as a poet of the first rank by any secular measure.

He traced the movement through the major poems: the 'Dark Night', with its images of the soul going out unseen in darkness to meet the Beloved on the mountainside; the 'Spiritual Canticle', with its breathless question 'Where have you hidden, Beloved?' and its extraordinary catalogue of creation as the trace left by the passing God; the 'Living Flame of Love', that most interior of the poems, addressed to the flame itself burning in the deepest centre of the soul, asking it to finish its work: 'Break the web of this encounter.'

What Fr Matt drew out above all was this: the poems are not descriptions of mystical states. They are not theological treatises in verse. They are love songs. They speak from the inside of an experience that cannot be fully translated into prose without losing what is essential. John himself, when pressed to explain them, said that he could not — the commentaries he wrote (the Ascent, the Dark Night, the Living Flame) were his best attempt to approach from outside what the poems expressed from inside. But the poems, he insisted, would always say more than the commentaries.

"Where have you hidden, Beloved, and left me moaning? You fled like the stag after wounding me; I went out calling you, but you were gone." — St John of the Cross, 'Spiritual Canticle', stanza 1

A Third Birthday — The Sumptuous Table

The day had given us beauty of many kinds: the soaring beauty of the Cathedral, the spare beauty of the monastery, the dramatic beauty of the escape route, the lyrical beauty of the poems. It ended with a beauty of a different and entirely human kind: the celebration of yet another pilgrim's birthday at dinner.

For the third time on this pilgrimage, a table became a place of particular grace. The dinner was sumptuous — Toledo knows how to feed its guests — and the festivity that surrounded the birthday was not a contrast to the day's sacred character but its completion. John of the Cross, whose poetry overflows with the imagery of banqueting and wine, of the Beloved preparing a table in the wilderness, would not have been surprised. He knew that the God who hides in prison cells and gorges above rivers is also the God who sets a table in the presence of our enemies and anoints our heads with oil.

We ate. We laughed. We gave thanks. And Toledo, outside the windows, held the night as it has held every night for a thousand years — ancient, patient, luminous on its rock above the river.

