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Feast of St. John of the Cross

Gerelyn Hollingsworth | Dec. 14, 2009 NCR Today

Super Flumina Babilonis

Salmo 136

Encima de las corrientes
que en Babilonia hallaba,
all' me sente llorando,
all' la tierra regaba,

Acordándome de ti,
¡oh S'on!, a quien amaba.
Era dulce tu memoria,
y conella más lloraba.

Dexé los trajes de fiesta,
los de trabajo tomaba,
y colqué en los verdes sauces
la música que llevaba,

Peniendola en esperanza
de aquello que en ti esperaba.

--San Juan de la Cruz [1]

Today is the feast of St. John of the Cross, poet, mystic, founder, with St. Teresa of Avila, of the Discalced Carmelites.

"He was born Juan de Yepes, third son of Gonzalo de Yepes and Catalina Alvarez, in Fontiveros, a small town near Avila, in 1542. In Gonzalo's and Catalina's story we find our first major lesson about John. Gonzalo was an orphan who lived with a wealthy uncle involved in the silk trade. In the course of working for his uncle, Gonzalo met Catalina Alvarez, a poor weaver. They fell in love, but to Gonzalo's dismay, his family greeted his engagement with anger, threatening to disown him if he were to marry below his estate. Their motives probably were more complex than mere class snobbery. The Yepes family had Jewish roots, a fact carefully hidden to avoid legal restrictions imposed on those who lacked limpieza de sangre, purity of blood. Catalina's background was obscure but the Yepes family feared that questions raised about her origins might lead to an investigation of their own. Better to wash their hands of the boy completely than to risk honor and money before the Inquisition."

--from "John of the Cross: The Person, His Times, His Writings," by Michael Dodd, OCD., in *Carmelite Studies VI: John Of The Cross, edited by Steven Payne, OCD*

[2]

Like St. Teresa of Avila, [3] St. John of the Cross [4]came from a family with Jewish roots. The Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, explains the Spanish "obsession" with "purity of blood" in his book, *Teresa of Avila.* [5]

Gerald Brenan and Lynda Nicholson provide more background on how the Inquisition dealt with those who "lapsed into Judaism" in *St. John of the Cross: His Life and Poetry.* [6]

John's paraphrase of the yearning Psalm 136 may reveal some of his feelings about the family secrets. For a translation, click here. [7]

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