



Art of the Month: December



On 14th December we celebrate the Feast of St John of the Cross. This rather stark painting of St John of the Cross is by the Spanish painter, Francisco de Zurbarán who lived in the 1600's. He tends to paint individual figures, mainly monks, nuns, and martyrs.. Zurbarán might well remind you of the works of Michelangelo Merisi better known by the place in which he grew up, namely, Caravaggio. Like Caravaggio, Zurbarán excels in the use of chiaroscuro which is also known as tenebrism which is characterized by predominantly dark tones and shadows with dramatically contrasting effects of light. This dramatic illumination works well in expressing a poem of St. John of the Cross, which became known as The Dark Night of the Soul.

I imagine you might have been expecting a cosy Nativity Scene for this month's painting. It was tempting to choose something along those lines but that would have been too easy! The pupils who go to Salamanca and Avila learn about this great saint who was a friend and Spiritual Director of St Teresa of Ávila. John spent much of his youth in the poverty of an orphanage, where he was clothed, fed, and given an elementary education. At the age of 17, he found a job in a hospital and was accepted into a Jesuit college. In 1563 he entered the Carmelite Order. When he met Teresa of Ávila and learned from her about the reform of the Carmelite Order, John decided to help with it. As part of this decision, he wore sandals instead of shoes and lived very simply in prayer and solitude. In 1577 the attitude toward the reform shifted. John was caught up in a misunderstanding and imprisoned at Toledo, Spain. He was locked in a cell six feet wide and ten feet long for nine months, with no light except that which filtered through a slit high up in the wall. He later forgave the men who had imprisoned him. How could he do that? He explained, "Where there is no love, put love, and you will find love." During those months of darkness in that little cell, John could have become bitter, revengeful, or filled with despair. But instead, he kept himself open to God's action, for no prison could separate him from God's all-embracing love. During this time he had many beautiful experiences and encounters with God in prayer. Later he would describe these experiences in poetry. In 1578 John escaped to southern Spain to join the reformed Carmelites. There he held leadership positions and wrote reflections on his experiences, which showed his deep spirit of prayer. When he became ill, he chose to go to the city of Ubeda, where no one knew him. It was there that he died. Our teachers are not likely to spend time in a dark cell, but there can be dark moments when we feel unappreciated. It is then, most of all perhaps, that we put love...and then find love! A Holy and Happy Christmas to one and all.

Monsignor Monaghan