

Day Five: Living stones

Today our pilgrims spend the fifth day of the pilgrimage in the city of Segovia, about 45 miles north-east of Avila. The city is famed for its architecture and boasts both a major example of Roman civil engineering and the last Gothic cathedral to be built in Spain. In Carmelite history, Segovia is home to two early foundations: the Monastery of St Joseph's (Teresa's ninth foundation and established in 1574); and the Discalced friary where St John of the Cross lived as prior for three years and which now houses his tomb. Our pilgrims will celebrate Mass there before returning to Avila this evening.

The pilgrims begin their day in Segovia by visiting the famous Roman aqueduct built sometime in the first century AD to bring water into the city from the nearby mountains. This remarkable feat of engineering spans half a mile, with 167 arches constructed from some 25,000 granite blocks. What is extraordinary is that the aqueduct is built entirely without mortar, the whole structure being held in place by the Roman appreciation of the fine balance of stresses and loads which has allowed the arches to stand for two thousand years with little need of repair or conservation. The Romans did not invent the arch – it was already known in a basic form in Persia, Greece and Mesopotamia – but their advanced understanding of the physics involved enabled them to develop its use and it was quickly employed in the construction of bridges, amphitheatres, aqueducts and triumphal arches throughout the Empire. As the Romans knew only too well, the building of successful arches required choosing the best materials, preparing solid foundations and firm side walls, and employing stone masons who could cut the granite blocks with the finest levels of precision.

Teresa's writings, especially those concerning the building of strong healthy communities, are replete with construction imagery; although as she tells us, her first childhood attempts with her brother to build little hermitages in the family garden consistently ended in disaster (*Life*, 1.5). Maybe it is this memory which leads her to insist on establishing solid foundations for her communities. 'Prayer must be the foundation of this house' she tells us (*Way of Perfection*, 4.9), and to support that the availability of good confessors and wise spiritual directors is essential. Without them, 'the whole building will be wobbly' (*Way of Perfection*, 5.4). For Teresa this responsibility to lay good foundations is not restricted to the first or the founding generation. Like the Roman architects before her, Teresa understood that each layer of the building, each row of arches, each generation of sisters, must bear the weight of those who follow; each generation is in reality the foundation of the next, and must be sufficiently strong and well balanced to bear its load in the edifice as a whole.

What does it profit me that our forebears had been so holy if I afterward am so wretched that I leave the edifice damaged through bad customs? For it is clear that those who come will not so much remember those who lived many years ago as those they see before them. (*Foundations*, 4.6)

As such each sister, through fidelity, integrity and a generous spirit, must 'strive to be the kind of rock on which the edifice may again be raised' (*Foundations*, 4.7). This is as true for our families, parish communities and secular and tertiary orders as it is for the houses of religious for whom Teresa was originally writing. Each of us, as vital stones in the structure, must bear the load needed in the work of building Christ's church; sustaining, supporting and interlocking with the other living stones which surround us.

St John of the Cross also knew an interest in building work and during his relatively peaceful period as prior at Segovia planned significant improvements to the friary and took great personal delight in helping to landscape the grounds. John, too, likens the art of living in community to the craftsmanship of the stone mason. In a realistic appreciation of the mortifications of community life he advises:

You should understand that those who are in the monastery are craftsmen placed there by God to mortify you by working and chiselling at you. Some will chisel with words, telling you what you would rather not hear; others by deed, doing against you what you would rather not endure; others by their temperament, being in their person and in their actions a bother and annoyance to you; and others by their thoughts, neither esteeming nor feeling love for you. (*Counsels*, 3)

Being purified in community (whatever form that community takes) will involve the constant chipping away of our faults, our delusions and our self-satisfaction. Only this will perfect our love of God and neighbour, emptying us out so we can be flooded with divine love. For John, it is this love which acts as the mortar binding together the bricks of the Christian community, and as he more than once tells the nuns of Segovia, where this love is lacking, we must labour to supply it: 'where there is no love, put love, and you will draw out love' (*Letter 26*, to the prioress of St Joseph's, Segovia). St John of the Cross, craftsman of the spiritual life, pray for us!

Pilgrims' Liturgy

Jesus said to his disciples, "As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you. Remain in my love. If you keep my commandments you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and remain in his love. As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you. I have told you this so that my own joy may be in you, and your joy may be complete. This is my commandment: love one another, as I have loved you." (John 15; 9-17)

We pray for ourselves that we may be living stones in the Church, forming a firm foundation for those who are to come, giving thanks always for those who have gone before us.

We pray for those who know dereliction and despair at this time. May God's love fill their hearts with the courage to rebuild their lives, and to trust those who labour alongside them.

Father, you endowed Saint Teresa and Saint John of the Cross with a firm desire to labour for you, building strong communities of prayer founded on gospel charity. Do not allow us to disfigure or damage this work, but through our constant will to love one another may we give glory to your name. We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ your Son, who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.