

19. October 2025

THE LIVES OF THE SAINTS

“Saint Peter of Alcantara: A reformer not without difficulty”

Pedro Garavito was born in Alcántara, Spain, in 1499 and, at the age of sixteen, entered the Franciscan Order. There he led a life of strict penance, particularly with regard to food and sleep, to a degree that is difficult for us to imagine today. This is why we tend to admire the saints for their asceticism rather than imitate it. While this is understandable, it can also have negative long-term effects. In fact, asceticism has almost completely disappeared from the life of the Church, so that, in general, fasting barely exists anymore. We risk losing the ability to imagine restraining ourselves from bodily comforts for love of the Lord.

One need only ask an athlete how he stays in good shape. He would undoubtedly reply that he trains hard and practices the necessary discipline. If we think this applies only to sports and not to the spiritual life, let us remember St. Paul's words:

"Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. Well, (...) I pommel my body and subdue it, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified." (1 Cor. 9:25–27).

Asceticism involves restraining not only bodily desires, but also spiritual ones. It is a reconquest of dominion over oneself under the lordship of Christ. In this way, we will be better able to serve the Lord.

When St. Peter of Alcantara was appointed superior, he introduced a more austere diet. He was saddened to see that the Franciscan rule was no longer strictly observed. He became a sought-after preacher, and the King of Portugal called him to his court, where, thanks to his presence, several high-ranking personalities were converted. However, he did not feel comfortable in this role and returned to the order.

Subsequently, he was entrusted with presiding over several convents. As provincial superior, he presented his plans for reform, but they were rejected by the representatives of the general chapter as too strict.

So, for the time being, he set his plans aside and declined any position. He retired to a hermitage with another monk, where they led an austere life that attracted others. Eventually, a community formed around them.

As we saw in the October 15 meditation on the story of St. Teresa of Avila, the reform of a religious order is a great and important task. Over time, the initial fervor of an order can diminish, and a lifestyle can take hold that reflects the founding idea less and less. It is then a grace when the Lord raises up someone who strives to revive and remind the community of its original charism.

Although St. Peter of Alcantara would have been satisfied with the community that had adhered to his strict rhythm of life, the Lord clearly had other plans. He was called back to his province. Still thinking of the reform he had once attempted to implement, he presented his plans to the local bishop. The bishop was open to the idea, but the provincial superior rejected it. Peter did not give up, though, and presented his reform projects directly to Pope Julius III. The pope approved them and placed Peter under the obedience of the minister general of another Franciscan branch. Later, Pope Paul IV granted him the authority to found as many reformed monasteries as he wished. Thus, Peter of Alcantara had a free hand to act.

The first Reformed monastery was established in Pedroso de Acim. But this greatly displeased his former brothers in the community, who branded him a deserter, a traitor, and a rebel. They stirred up intrigue and confusion and placed all kinds of obstacles in his way. However, the reform ended up prevailing.

Saint Peter had very profound mystical experiences and was greatly appreciated by Saint Teresa of Ávila, who met him when he was already an old man. Having experienced similar things himself, he could understand the saint's mystical phenomena from within. Pedro de Alcántara shared a powerful phrase with her about persecution: "One of the heaviest crosses on earth is the enmity of well-intentioned people."

The spiritual friendship between Pedro de Alcántara and Teresa of Ávila continued even after the saint's death. Saint Teresa recounted that, after his death on October 18, 1562, he appeared to her and revealed himself to be closer to her than ever before. Jesus himself also appeared to her and assured her that no request made to him through the intercession of Peter of Alcantara would be ignored.

The “*Golden Treatise on Mental Prayer*” is one of the saint's notable writings and is an aid for those who wish to deepen their prayer life.

Pedro de Alcántara was beatified in 1622 and canonized seven years later. The reformed branch he founded, the “*Alcantarian Franciscans*,” was integrated into the other observant branches by Pope Leo XIII.

Let us remember the following words from today's saint:

"Prayer is the food of love, the strengthening of faith, the consolidation of hope, and the joy of the heart. It helps us discover the truth, overcome temptations, control pain, renew our intentions, and overcome mediocrity. Prayer consumes the rust of sin and ignites the fire of love. Prayer is capable of opening heaven."

In today's "3 Minutes for Abba," I reflected on another phrase from the saint: <https://en.elijamission.net/>

Saint Peter of Alcantara, pray for a true renewal of religious orders and of the whole Church!

Meditation on the Gospel of the day: <https://en.elijamission.net/praying-without-losing-heart/>