

My contribution to the discussion on St Teresa's letter #269

Background

The reformed way of life in the Discalced (nuns and friars) monasteries was under threat at this time. Earlier on three newly found reformed monasteries were ordered to be closed down by the General Chapter at Piacenza in 1575. Rossi, the prior general, forbade the Discalced friars from setting up a separate province.

The political background is important to the understanding of the crisis. King Philip II wanted to reform the religious orders in Spain. He had disagreement with the Pope partly because he thought the Pope was corrupt. He also was worried about the spread of Protestantism. So King Philip insisted that he should have a say in appointing the Papal Nuncio in Spain and that the nuncio should do what he said. Gracian was well-connected with the King because of his family background, and he soon rose to the rank of Visitor for the Carmelite monasteries (both Calced and Discalced), representing the nuncio, Ormaneto. He was spearheading the reform movement with the blessings from the King and the nuncio. (Teresa was very impressed by Gracian, not only by his personality and charm, but probably because of what he was doing, and so she was defending him in her letter.) However, Gracian encountered great resistance from the monasteries in Andalusia.

Rossi, at that time, was the prior general from Rome. Although St Teresa had Rossi's instruction to found more reformed communities, Rossi had forbidden her to found them in Andalusia. It was because Rossi was aware of the resistance of the communities in Andalusia towards the reform movement. (We read of this foundation that she found with the assistance of Gracian that was in fact in Andalusia and she realized then that she might have trouble. She argued that she did not know it was in the territory of Andalusia.) There were bad feelings between the Calced and the Discalced (St John of the Cross had been imprisoned and had just escaped), and from her letter, we learned that there were mis-representations and false accusations of the Discalced way of life to the authority (the nuncio and the Royal Council) (paras 3,4 and 5 of the letter). Rossi was also worried about the split in the Order, for Gracian was threatening to set up a separate province for the discalced.

St Teresa's letter to Pablo Hernandez, SJ (#269)

This letter tells us very clearly the difficult situation Teresa and those who followed her reform were in because the nuncio and the king, who were on Gracian and Teresa's side, were hearing damaging things about Teresa, Gracian and the reformed communities. These were real challenges that might abort the reform that she had been bringing to the Order.

In this letter, St Teresa showed how she handled things in the face of adversities. She felt she had to protect the nuns and friars in these monasteries as she was responsible for them. As Fr Matt pointed out in the study notes, she bore this suffering for the sake of love – the love of her nuns and friars, and the love she had for God who wanted her to found these foundations. She wrote that she would not mind the sufferings if it were only on her. She accepted ‘with joy’ (para 6) what the Lord ‘wills’ if it were only herself who was targeted. However, for the injustice that was done to other nuns and friars she felt she had to present her side of the story. ‘It is not right that so many nuns who are servants of God be discredited through false declarations.’ (para 10 of the letter). Also, it pained her to see ‘these servants of God are suffering’ (para 11). This shows how much she loved her nuns and friars.

1. What I learned from this letter is that Teresa did not just accept suffering and injustice passively but she found the occasion to react (the arrival of Pablo Hernandez, the Jesuit, to Madrid who might have the ear of the president of the Royal Council) -- to write to him asking him to present her side of the story with facts and evidence. She saw this as her chance of redress.

In our life, we do not have to seek suffering. Some sufferings are self-afflicted and others unavoidable. Teresa showed us the attitude towards sufferings – to accept them if they cannot be avoided. However, it does not mean that we accept them passively. There may be ways to change the situation, and so change our fortunes.

2. Looking at Teresa’s situation from a broader perspective, I come to understand the perspective from the other side. Teresa did found the monasteries bypassing her provincials. She obtained permission from the vicar general or even the king. One can understand why it was so significant for her to get the blessing of Rossi when she set up St Joseph at Avila. She must have ruffled a few feathers. With Gracian also rather ruthless in the reform movement, no wonder why the others were against them. They might have seen her and Gracian being rebellious. That might be what Rossi was trying to prevent by ordering the closure of three foundations. He too was protecting the Order.

How do we improve an existing system without causing misgivings or resistance? Can we introduce fundamental changes without threatening the status quo of the people in authority? How can we make people see (and so bring them with you) that the way they are practicing are not the way to achieve the goal?