

Letter to Fr. Jeronimo Gracian OCD, Alcala

No. 376 [360 or 359], 21st February 1581

Teresa arrived in Palencia December 29th 1580 and immediately founded her new Carmel. However they are still looking for a suitable house. They will move into the new house May 26th and Teresa will leave Palencia for the foundation in Soria May 29th. So Teresa spends exactly five months in Palencia. She is very involved in searching for a house and helping and supporting her new community. However her attention, energy and prayers are also elsewhere.

Alcala de Henares: The first Provincial Chapter of the new Discalced Carmelite Province will begin at Alcala March 3rd, 1581. Teresa is very involved in the preparation for this Chapter, is very concerned with its progress and is delighted with its outcome: *“The whole affair seems like a dream. For even though we would have had to think hard about what to do, we wouldn’t have succeeded in doing anything as well as God has. May he be always praised for everything.”* [Letter 23rd March 1581] This does not mean that everything worked out exactly as Teresa wanted it but she is aware that things could be a lot worse!

Jeronimo Gracian OCD is the most important of Teresa’s collaborators among her friars and the one she clearly wants to see elected Provincial. They first meet at Beas in 1575 and work very closely from then on. He is elected the first Provincial of the Discalced at the Chapter in Alcala, March 4th 1581. He died in Brussels 21st September 1614 [shortly after Teresa’s beatification], so this month we celebrate the 400th anniversary of his death. He is the most important of all the recipients of Teresa’s letters for two reasons: 1. A total of 114 of Teresa’s letters to Gracian have come down to us [more than anyone else] and it is not his fault that all the other letters she wrote to him were lost – he meticulously kept all of them! 2. He is one of the very few people who recognised from the beginning the importance of Teresa’s letters and he wanted to publish them immediately after her death.

This **letter** is one of the many that passed between them in the months of preparation for the Chapter. It gives us some key insights into Teresa’s concerns and priorities. It is worthwhile to read as a unit all the letters that Teresa wrote from Palencia – we are invited into the mind and heart of a founder at a critical time in her life’s work. Teresa is not at the Chapter and has no power to influence its decisions. However she is acutely aware that decisions taken in Alcala will have long term impact on the lives of her nuns and friars and that mistakes made will be very difficult to rectify. She feels her powerlessness and distance from Alcala and yet at the same time the need to do all that she can to influence the outcome even from this distance.

For reflection/discussion

1. This is a letter between two very close friends and collaborators. Words she wrote to Gracian five years earlier are equally applicable here: *“But how tiresome I am! May it not prove a burden to **Mi Padre** to have to hear these things, for you and I are weighed down with a very heavy load and we have to render an account to God and to the world.”* [Letter no 141, Nov/Dec 1576]. We get a sense from this letter of the heavy load they are sharing and their sense of awesome responsibility. What does she mean by “rendering an account to God and to the world”?

2. The spiritual freedom of her nuns is a major concern. That freedom can be compromised by unwise and restrictive rules and traditions, and also by fear or unwillingness to use the available freedoms. Our historical circumstances are very different but we too can find ourselves in situations

that compromise our spiritual freedom and we can be equally unwilling or afraid to make the necessary changes.

3. This letter tells us an enormous amount about Teresa's relationship with her friars and the complexity of that relationship. She is also very concerned about the foundations of the future relationship between her friars and nuns that are being laid in Alcala. Has this changed much in the past 400 years!

4. Teresa is trying to trust those making the decisions at Alcala and at the same time feels a great need to remind, influence, warn and affirm these same people. Sometimes it seems she is like a mother speaking to her teenage sons! She has wisdom and insight they do not have but how can she say this in the right way.

5. Teresa holds no official Office and has no power but she is showing great leadership in this letter – a lesson in leadership for all of us.