

ST. TERESA'S AT COSPICUA

in retrospect upon the occasion of the 350th anniversary of the arrival of the DISCALCED CARMELITES In Malta

A Short Historical Survey by John Leone O.C.D.

PREAMBLE

The year 1975 coincides with the 350th anniversary of the establishment of the Discalced Carmelites in Malta, under the Grandmastership of Antoine de Paule.

The occasion calls for the recapture of the Mother House at Cospicua, especially with reference to its Status nine short years later. If for no other reason, for the simple consideration that as from that early stage St. Teresa's reveals its full identity as an International Missionary College over the span of 150 odd years.

The first three books, still in reasonably good state of preservation, of the Conventual Acts of the House, notwithstanding the well known ordeal that befell the House at the dawn of the last world war, reducing it to shambles, offer the inquisitive researcher a nearly day to day diary of the College's major event and activities, with reference to the many goings and comings of Missionaries to and from Mission Lands, having the same House served the purpose of a Hospice besides that of a Missionary College.

The contents of these commemorative notes are guaranteed to faithfully portray events recorded in these Official Acts, except for the unavoidable trimmings drawn from contemporary historical sources, strictly correlated.

Owing to the foregoing consideration, we shall be excused from overloading this literary intervention with repeated references to the same Acts, it being understood that by and large we shall be drawing mainly from the latter source. Nonetheless whenever we integrate our narration from anywhere else, we shall be careful to append such sources.

With this short preamble over, we now propose to set out on the 'Curriculum Vitae' of our Missionary College - its Birth, Lifetime and, alas, its Demise; even if with regard to the last mentioned phase, at the venerable age of past 150 years.

INTERNATIONAL MISSIONARY COLLEGES & THE TERESIAN REFORM'S CHARISMA

FIGURES at the top, whenever the structure they preside over, normally limit their interventions to the sole approval of a given initiative undertaken at a lower level. The sequence is not unlike that of a house about to be built. Taken account of the needs, one would brief an architect to prepare plans, which when ready are submitted to some authority for approval. The same applies substantially for a Foundation of a Religious House/Institution. This, however, was not the case with St. Teresa's. The sequence was in the reverse. The Governing Body itself of the Reform conceived the project, set to it a purpose and finally took it upon itself to its successful completion. And with what patronage enriched! The reigning Pontiff Urbanus VIII blessed it; the Catholic Emperor Ferdinand IV of Spain backed it.

From early 1600 three Missionary Colleges are known to have existed within the Reform of the Discalced Carmelites. The earliest (1615) bearing three different names at different times, but best known by its last, St. Pancratius's, adjacent to the old Roman Basilica by the same name in Rome, at the Gianicolo, flourished until its suppression in 1875, due to the politico-religious conditions then prevailing in Italy, but set up once more in 1936. A second College at Louvain in Belgium, and a third in Malta (Bullarium Carmelitanum). While the second was concerned with the training of Discalced Carmelites for underground pastoral work towards the re-evangelization of the Northern Regions of Europe (England, Germany and Holland), the first and third were strictly Missionary, catering for the Christianization proponent of the East, from Asia Minor to Mesopotamia and Malabar . (1)

A CRISIS

How was it that an Order with a contemplative charisma as the Teresian Reform could have taken so enthusiastically to Missionary work? This apparent anomaly calls for a few short explanatory remarks with a view to justify the *raison d'être* of the said Missionary Colleges in the background of the Teresian Reform. The Saintly Foundress of Reformed Carmel had as yet been fresh in her grave, happily survived by a flourishing Religious Family of both men and women professing the same set of rules, and inspired by her very same spirit for the glory of God, when within either Branch a twofold trend loomed large and uncompromising, in respect of the Reform's outward expansion.

The first of these trends was centripetal, doggedly retaining the Reform within the national boundaries of Spain, the land of its birth; the second, centrifugal, finding no reason whatsoever why the same Reform should not extend beyond Spain, and for that matter, equating its potential dimensions with those of the Church itself inclusive of Missionary Lands. (2)

THE SOLUTION

Providential circumstances conspired in tipping entirely the scales in favour of the second of the two trends. Were it not for that change of wind, the Teresian Reform would have never found its way to these shores 350 years ago; still less for St. Teresa's College to see the light of day. God's ways do not always tally with ours, and even prevail in spite of these and through their very resistance.

As the foregoing crisis had been building up within the infant Reform, the unpredictable worked its way in between the two both well-meaning factions, and it solved the whole problem overnight. It happened in three stages strictly connected.

As the Teresian Reform got well established in Spain, it was found necessary that it should have two extraterritorial outposts on Italian soil that its official dealings with the Holy See might be effectively handled by men on the spot. In actual fact one such House was set up at Genoa, and a second in Rome. Obviously the latter was the more important, as the former was meant to serve as a hospice for men in transit to Rome.

The two Houses among them had a staff of thirty Religious, all of them picked men, and imbued with the Teresian Spirit, instilled in them by none else than St. John of the Cross under whose inspired leadership the entire first generation of Discalced Carmelites received their religious formation. Few had been left in Spain that could have made more impressive ambassadors of their Reform within hearing range of the Holy See (Stanislao di S. Teresa: *Compendio della Storia dell' Ordine Carmelitano*, pp. 227-229). The latter, in truth, was so favourably impressed by the fervour of either padre, that the reigning Pontiff Clement VIII, fully appreciative of their spiritual potential for the post-Tridentine reconstruction of the Religious life, deeply shaken throughout Europe, expressed the wish that the Teresian Reform be established permanently in the Eternal City, with a view that from that focal point it might expand throughout the world; and gracefully offered to that end the famous church of Santa Maria della Scala, with its adjoining premises, in the Roman quarter of Trastevere.

This imaginative idea of Clement VIII was however firmly resisted by the General of the Reform. In justification of his refusal, he pleaded that only Spaniards could physically withstand the austerities of the Reform's Rule. Unsuccessful in swaying in line with his plans the General's judgement, even following recourse made to the Catholic king of Spain, requested to intervene and make the overzealous General to call off his unjustified resistance, Clement VIII in the circumstances saw fit to act on a wise alternative that was to bring much splendour and glory in its wake to the Teresian Reform.

The Reform's Procurator, that is the General's representative with residence at Rome, was duly summoned for an interview with the Pontiff. The meeting did not last long, for there was only one question to be asked, and it called also for a very simple answer. The Pontiff wanted to learn how many Discalced Carmelites were to be found at the time on Italian soil. 'Thirty, your Holiness', hesitated the Procurator, reading the Pope's mind. 'Then - interposed the Pontiff - what only two could start in Spain, thirty should prove more than enough to spread it outside'. Clement's concluding remark spelled a perfect checkmate. The Pontiff's intentions were fully and clearly set in *SACRAMENTUM MUNDI*, Bull dated 20th March, 1598. In short it provided that the Discalced Carmelites already in Italy were not to go back to Spain; that they were declared taken off from the

jurisdiction of the Spanish General, and erected from that date into a separate Congregation, which while remaining within the same Reform would nevertheless fall under the immediate good-pleasure and jurisdiction of the Holy See.

High-handed as this summary settlement adopted by Clement VIII may appear, by and large it worked to the satisfaction of all concerned. And not only no attempt is known to have been made by the General in Spain to withdraw, in further defiance to the Pontiff's dispositions, his subjects already in Italy, but the exodus of Religious from Spain, anxious to share in the apostolic prospects of the new Congregation in Italy, was in no way prevented from assuming an ever increased tempo. These poured uninterruptedly either into Genoa or Rome, and later on into Naples. From then on it looked like a Pentecostal explosion; and from these last three points the sons of St. Teresa broke all barriers in Europe. There were few corners they failed to reach. The history of the newly established Congregation reads like springtime with a harvest its barns could hardly contain. (3)

MISSIONARY PIONEERING

Prior to the settlement by Clement VIII, of the foregoing burning question against outside expansion, the Reform had made some half-hearted attempts to transplant itself to Spain's overseas territories, under the Reform's first Provincial Jerome of the Mother of God (Gracian), but were too sporadic to survive very long, and Nicholas Doria, Jerome's successor, lost no time in bringing them to complete extinction. (4)

Having unfurled the banner of the Teresian Reform practically all over Europe, the question of taking it further to Mission Lands was sooner or later to arise in the Congregation of St. Elias. When it did, common sense alone was the guideline. It was unanimously agreed the Reform's inherent thrust towards Mission Lands was taken as springing from the burning heart of their Holy Mother for the salvation of souls, irrespective of lands and people to be gained for Christ. 'An example of this spirit - writes Silverius of St. Teresa, already quoted - was given in 1605, five years only since the Congregation's erection, when the question came up for discussion in the General Chapter, held in Rome on that year. All the newly-elected Superiors resigned to their offices and volunteered to go to the Missions in any part of the world where Obedience would decide to send them. This Act of the General Chapter received much favourable comment and praise in Ecclesiastical Circles at Rome, including the Sacred College and the Holy Father himself. (5)

Among those enthusiastically sponsoring this new initiative in the Reform, were the Venerables Thomas of Jesus, already founder of the Deserts in Spain, Dominic of Jesus-Mary (Ruzzola), Peter of the Mother of God, and Ferdinand of St. Mary. Their personal contributions and zeal for the erection of Propaganda Fide, the Foreign Missions' power house at Rome, was so substantial that they are rightly considered four of its Founding Fathers.

It had been with a view to enable prospective missionaries proving more effective in their field of work that the two Missionary Colleges mentioned earlier in these notes, were planned and set up with so much zeal and success.

However, even prior to the Reform's official stand in this matter came into the open, four Discalced Carmelites had left the Eternal City in 1605, commissioned to engage in a concerted endeavour in the conversion of what was then known Persia. Among those four pioneering emissaries, there was one by name Paul of Jesus-Mary (Rivarola), later to become Head of the Congregation of St. Elias on three different occasions within the years 1623-1641, three stops, as it were, corresponding to as many landmarks in the history of the Malta Missionary College. (6)

In addition to their missionary activities, the emissaries had been entrusted by Clement VIII with a diplomatic mission to the Shah sive Emperor of Persia. Don Rinaldo Riodolid, a nobleman from Aragon, well versed in diplomatic matters, was assigned to accompany them, and the expedition had been entrusted to the first known apostles of that country Simon and Jude, whose patronage the Pontiff wished to be symbolized in the appendage of those two names to those already owned by the two most senior among the party, whereby Paul and John became from then on to be known as Paul-Simon of Jesus-Mary, and John-Jude of St. Eliseus, respectively. (7)

BRIDGEHEAD FROM MALTA

The College of St. Pancratius was in the meantime throbbing with its missionary activities. The turnover of its streamlined Missionaries proved beyond expectation; though that notwithstanding the demand was found to be greater than the supply. To add to this problem, available missionaries lacked adequate facilities to reach fast enough where their needs called for in the Mission Lands. (8)

To elaborate briefly on the foregoing, in those distant times, Rome was all but an ideal point of embarkation to the East, gateway to the land routes leading to lands entrusted to the Teresian Reform for evangelization. It was in that background that the happy idea of a second Missionary College struck the forward-looking, imaginative Paul-Simon, himself a seasoned Missionary, and then providentially elected at this turn of events, to the Generalate of the Teresian Reform. The projected College in Malta would solve two problems in one stroke.

LOOKING FURTHER ON

As a port of call, Malta was perhaps unique even at the dawn of the Discalced Carmelites' new adventure in the missionary field. The Venetian Fleet, monopolizing as it did the Mediterranean Sea routes, seldom did bypass these Islands on its way to the East. Here it was bound to call that it might replenish itself with provisions for its onward sailings, as well as to load or unload passengers to and from the East. Shrewd as all Genoese have the reputation to be in these matters, Paul-Simon could not have missed the right assessment of this situation and its prospects, and wasted little time in taking swift action for the erection of a Missionary College on these Islands. What else could have solved the problem that he found facing him at his appointment to the Generalate of the Congregation? Time also proved him all but wrong both in respect of the conception of the idea, as well as the tactful way he went about in seeing it through to the very last detail.

1. Silverius of St. Teresa: Carmel's Missionary Spirit: Oklahoma 1952: p. 24. 2. Silverius of St. Teresa: opere citato pp. 11-16. 3. Stanislao di St. Teresa: ibidem pp. 256-262. 4. Silverius of St. Teresa: ibidem pp. 13-16. 5. Carmel's Missionary Spirit, pp. 22-23. 6. De Villiers-Wessels: Biblioteca Carm. Cc. 537-539. 7. Bullarium Carm. V.VI, p. 255. 8. Urbani VIII: Decet Nos in his pastoralis officii.