Charism and Conflict

Gregory Burke

In February 1592 the disciple and collaborator of St Teresa, Jerome Gracián who had been the first superior of the Discalced Carmelites was expelled from the Order. How do we deal with the civil war which is part of the history of the foundation of the Teresian Carmel? How do we tell the story so that it makes sense to us today? What can we learn from the story?

In preparation for the new Millennium the highest superiors of the Order, the General Definitory, in 1999 solemnly revoked the expulsion. The request to do this was made to the 1991 General Chapter at the time of the Fourth Centenary of the death of St John of the Cross. In between that request and the response of the General Definitory there had been a process of historical examination of the issues involved. It is extraordinary that the Order sought to reverse this expulsion after 400 years. It is sobering and revealing that it took this long.

The crux of the initial conflict was the meaning of the Teresian charism. Often the story of the conflict is told in ways that blame one or both of these men. I believe it is better to seek to understand than to condemn. The two principals were Gracián and his immediate successor as superior, Nicholas Doria.

Jerome Gracián and Nicholas Doria

Jerome Gracián came from a family of Christian humanists associated with service to the Spanish royal family as secretaries and translators. He was born in Valladolid on 6 June 1545. He graduated as a Master of Arts from The University of Alcalá the age of 19. He then began the study of theology while being guided in prayer by Jesuit directors. He joined the Discalced Carmelites at Pastrana in 1572. He is invariably described even by those who are unsympathetic to him as gentle, intelligent, charismatic and charming. Teresa describes him as ‘a man of much learning, intelligence and modesty along with other great virtues’ (Foundations 23.1). She had no doubts about his leadership role in the new venture: She wrote to Inés de Jesús, prioress of Medina, telling her she found him perfect and asked the sisters pray that he be appointed superior of the nuns and so relieve her of the ‘burden of governing these houses, for I have never seen perfection combined with such gentleness’ (Letters, letter 72, Peers, vol. I, 175). Gracián was elected the first superior of the independent Discalced on 3 March 1581 to Teresa’s relief.

Nicholas Doria was born in Genoa on 18 May 1539 to a wealthy banking family. In 1570 business brought him to Seville where he settled and amasses a fortune. He had a religious conversion, gave his money to the poor and was ordained a priest in 1576. The following year he became a Discalced Carmelite in Seville. Doria understood the Discalced Carmelites as a reform movement and a return to primitive rigour. He became the spokesman and leader of the substantial group of friars who saw religious life in terms of
rigorous observance. An insight into their mentality can be gleaned from his opinion that an ‘Order where there is no fear of punishment was not an Order’.

Yet Doria while upholding the necessary role of fear in motivating religious was not simply a monster. He was a man of ability- he was sent in 1582 to represent the Discalced to Rome and in 1583 Gracian sent him to make the first European foundation outside Spain in Genoa. In looking at his portrait one sees a surprisingly mild face. The monastery he built in Genoa is in many ways beautiful in its location and layout.

During my time in Ávila studying Carmelite spirituality I made a point of visiting our old monastery of Pastrana which now houses both a hotel and a Franciscan friary. Here in a grave which is now unmarked Doria’s remains were placed. He had said his bones would cry out ‘Regular Observance! Regular Observance!’. As I stood there I was moved to pray for him. I thought of Doria’s high ideals, good intentions and talent. I mused on how the pain and damage he unintentionally wrought are now held in the mystery of God’s love.

Conflict
Jerome Gracián was first accused by Doria at the chapter of 1583. He charged that Gracián had ‘destroyed the Order by his easy ways and lack of rectitude in government’. Having inflamed the chapter Doria sought to limit Gracian’s apostolic ministry as it caused him to be ‘absent from the choir and community acts’. The lack of rectitude referred to ‘his indulgence in granting exemptions and for his charity and compassion in giving corrections’. Here in essence we have the clear example of the opposition of personal styles and spiritualities.

Gracián, like St Teresa sought to be loved and therefore more easily obeyed. He wrote a pointed manifesto against the ideas of Doria entitled: *Apology for Charity Against Some Who Under Colour of Observance of the Law Cause Charity to grow Cold and Disturb Religious Order*. For Doria charity and compassion was weakness which opposed the heroic call of religious life. What is surprising but necessary for us to accept is that his view was the one that was more in tune with the religious and social attitudes of the day. King Philip II faced with the prospect of the Reformation spreading to Spain felt much more secure with religious austerity and rigorism rather than moderation. The underlying anxiety is similar to that which today fuels the various contemporary religious fundamentalisms.

Gracián made his situation worse when he championed the friars’ close involvement with the Carmelite nuns. He supported the nuns lead by Maria de San José and Anne of Jesus who appealed to the Holy See to maintain the Teresian constitutions regarding the relationship of the nuns to the friars
against the innovations of Doria. This was certainly brave and principled but was seen as disloyal and disobedient. It led to harsh punishment against all those involved. In 1587 Gracián was formally charged with ten accusations which mostly related to his familiarity with the nuns. Gracián defended himself by arguing that many of these trivial matters could be explained by circumstances or his leadership role. He added that he had little confidence in justice administered by Doria as he was blinded by passion. He was formally admonished by the Consulta in November 1587, urged to lead the regular life, observe the laws, and exercise restraint in dealings with the nuns.

The last cause of offence was that Gracián began the Order’s missionary outreach by sending five friars to Africa in 1582. He was accused of thereby undermining the strict regular observance. Unfortunately the ship sank and all the friars were drowned. Gracián sent a second expedition which also did not reach its destination as they fell into the hands of English pirates. A third expedition was sent in 1583 which actually arrived in the Africa. Gracián’s defence of the missions was that Teresa had warmly approved of missionary activity as part of the friars’ vocation. The question then becomes what kind of authority did St Teresa have for the Discalced friars? Did her opinion matter at all? Was she a truly founder with what today we would call a charism or was she merely the accidental means for the reformed observance to come into being?

Gracián’s horizon was broader than the salvation of his own soul through penance and regular observance. From Teresa he had been given a vision of the way in which the life of a religious was at the apostolic service of the Church and evangelistic and missionary service of the whole world. He summarised the different positions: ‘some think that the welfare of the order lies in multiplying the number of monasteries in tiny Spanish villages and neglecting everything else. God has not led me by that road, but by the road of saving souls’.

Gracián did not quietly defend the missions in the first Discalced Carmelite treatise on the missions: The Stimulation of the Propagation of the Faith in 1586. He defended the Carmelite nuns against Doria’s changes to Teresa’s Constitutions. This involved seeking a papal brief which was successful. In the end Doria sought his own papal brief which when it appeared in April 1591 was a Roman compromise. The reaction of the Consulta was more marked by revenge than peace making.

St John of the Cross who had worn himself out as a member of the Consulta attempting to defend Gracián was not elected to any office at the chapter of June 1591. He was told to prepare himself for Mexico. Incidentally, he visited Gracián’s mother in Madrid before heading south to La Peñuela here he became ill while preparations were made to discredit him and have him share
Gracián’s fate. However he became ill was shamefully treated and died in Ubeda on 14 December, 1591.

Gracián was tried on the old charges and accused of incorrigibility. Efforts were made to obtain false testimony against him and intimidate those who supported him. No specific crime had been proved and the statement was made that no sin, not even a venial one, was involved. After eight months imprisonment Gracián despaired of justice. He was expelled from the Order on 17 February, 1592. He was given the garb of a secular priest and sent on his way.

Gracián appealed to the Pope and was turned down. He was given the habit of a Discalced Augustinian. In 1593 he was captured by pirates off Gaeta and taken as a hostage galley slave to Tunis. After he was ransomed he appealed to the Pope who heard him and declared ‘This man is a saint’. The brief Apostolicae Sedis Benignus of 5 March 1596 revoked his expulsion, restored his seniority and privileges in the Order whose superiors were commanded to readmit him. The Superior General Elias de San Martin refused on the ground that the brief had caused uproar and division among the brethren. Gracián was to die shortly in Brussels on 21 September 1614 shortly after the beatification of St Teresa for which he campaigned. Jerome Gracián lived and died a Teresian Carmelite but outside of the Discalced Carmelite Order.

Father Silverio in his History of the Order in Spain portrayed the triumph of the supporters of Doria over the supporters of Gracián as total and without any possible opposition. The superiors were more or less explicitly inspired by Doria’s maxims of government. General Chapters were held at Pastrana where the remains of Doria presided over the sessions to inspire the capitular fathers to preserve holy observance.

The offence Gracián gave was that he was moderate and humane in his government, close to the nuns and apostolic. As well, he began the Order’s missionary involvement thereby it was claimed undermining regular observance. The disturbing question that strikes a modern Carmelite is: how can these be offences since these are now required of us by our Constitutions?

The Teresian Charism
The identity of the Discalced Carmelite was the major topic of discussion at the General Chapters of renewal after the Second Vatican Council in 1967-68. The concept of charisms had been introduced by Pope Paul VI to discussion of religious life. Were we simply Carmelites who strictly observed the unmitigated Rule of St Albert or was there a distinctive Teresian charism?

The post-conciliar Order has based its self-understanding and renewed legislation on the foundation of a Teresian charism. This fundamental decision has meant that we have needed to change how we understood our
vocation and mission in the Church and the world. St Teresa understood herself as a founder and others like St John of the Cross did as well. When her writings were first published by Luís de Leon she was described on the cover as the founder of the Discalced Carmelite friars and nuns. The term reformer to describe Teresa’s role was polemical and came into use later.

In the foundation of the friars she was the one who obtained the approval of the Prior General, who recruited the first friars and obtained their first priory. She also took St John of the Cross with her on the foundation of Valladolid to teach him how the sisters lived. Especially she wanted him to see how they recreated. This humane balance of life was a feature of the Teresian way of life. Importantly Teresa was directing John of the Cross away from rigorism.

However Teresa herself also shared for a time her culture’s admiration of heroic and dramatic austerity. At Pastrana she met two Italian hermits and after explaining to them the original eremitical way of life of the Carmelites gave them the Discalced Carmelite habit. So began the priory of Pastrana where extreme austerities were to become a life-threatening part of the novitiate regime. When Teresa heard of what was happening she dispatched John of the Cross to introduce moderation and a more balanced way of life. It is important to note that in this instance Teresa is clearly acting as the one who is the author of this project.

When the friars have become established she has correspondence with some who resisted her authority. She wrote to Mariano, one of the erstwhile hermits, that she preferred moderation in asceticism and virtue rather than heroic austerity. The fact is that she was trying to attract candidates with intelligence and talent who would rightly be scared off by a lack of balance (Letters, Peers, vol. I, letter 148, 373). In fact in her personal correspondence with Gracián she pursues an ideal of holiness that brings together spiritual, emotional and physical health. She is concerned that he eats well and that he has enough sleep so that he can conserve his strength for the mission God has given him. Teresa reverses the popular idea of the holy person of her time as someone who fasted continuously, deprived themselves of sleep in prayer vigils and never indulged in the luxury of washing.

We can see then that just as there was a development in her own understanding of her own vocation from a first personal call to a sense of the needs of the Church and finally to the needs of the whole world especially those people who had not heard the Good news of Christ so there is a development in her understanding of the friars’ vocation. Her charism was not something that came to her in a blinding flash and remained unchanging ever after. It was a gift of the Spirit that grew in her as she grew in self knowledge, understanding of the needs of the Church and world and in communion with God.
Our past and the future
So, in our day when there have been other disputes that echo the Gracián-Doria conflict it is important for us not to see the Teresian charism as an unchanging substance sailing above history but a dynamic gift of God’s spirit in history. It is not identified with particular observances or customs it is grace, God’s gift of himself to us in our time and place bringing us into communion with God and one another.

Change therefore is not necessarily a threat to the authentic living of the charism. In fact it may well be needed. If we are upset by change then we need to be aware of our anxiety and to grow in both self-knowledge and in the trust and confidence in God. It is all too easy in a time of change to seek security in religious fundamentalism all forms of which have at heart a certain violence. As we can see in the way that Gracián was treated his human rights and dignity were violated by those in authority. It is a story too often repeated.

It is important for us not to be so convinced of our own infallibility that we cannot enter into respectful dialogue about our charism. It is all too easy to demonise those with whom we disagree, to identify ourselves as victims and to seek an opportunity to get our own back. Loving conversation is at the heart of Teresian prayer and community life. The fear and anxiety that marked the Doria-Gracián conflict meant that the community’s chapter, the place of discernment and dialogue, could not operate freely and properly on the basis of trust and mutual respect.

The story I have briefly told of the conflict about the interpretation of the Teresian charism in the early history of the Discalced Carmelite Order is a sad one. I have indicated some of its implications for the living of the Teresian charism today. After Gracián was expelled from the Order in 1592 his place in the history of the Order was told in ways that were not just. We are only now coming to terms with his contribution to the Order, what he stood for and why he suffered as he did.

The General Definitory of the Discalced Carmelites in the Official Declaration of Rehabilitation spoke of Gracián, along with Anne of Jesus and María de San José , as a victim of injustice. All three were ‘people implicitly trusted by our Holy Mother and examples of the highest order in the founding group’. It called Gracián ‘the spiritual son and beloved disciple of our Mother St Teresa’. They stated, ‘we feel the duty to express profound regret for the expulsion from the Order inflicted on Fr Jerome Gracián of the Mother of God, and for the resulting wound, source of conflicts and divisions that were opened in this way in the minds and hearts of the sons and daughters of St Teresa of Jesus’. Gracián in this view was not the sole victim of his expulsion but so equally was the whole Teresian family, including both religious and
secular members. We need to be reconciled with the past that we may face the future with integrity and hope.

Greg Burke is an Australian who was professed as a Teresian Carmelite in 1970 and ordained a priest in 1975. Since then he has ministered throughout Australia including work with the Carmelite nuns and Secular Order as well as time as a parish priest in Western Australia. His current mission is to bring Carmelite spirituality to a new audience beyond those already familiar with it.