

PLANNING AN EFFECTIVE MEETING

Cheri Kluever, OCDS

Let me tell you about my first visit to an OCDS meeting.

In the back of my parish church I found an old Carmelite Digest with information about Secular Carmel. I boldly went to the meeting without an invitation or contacting anyone. I arrived at 1:20 for the 1:30 meeting but the meeting had already begun and was in progress. “Hmmm.” I thought. These people are really prompt.

The next two months I arrived earlier and earlier only to find the meetings well in progress. No one said anything but Fr. John Lysaght, the Spiritual Assistant did look at me over the top of his glasses but never said a word.

Finally I mustered up all the courage I could find and asked a member why they started so early? She told me the meetings started at 1:00 pm. Oops. I had just become the poster child for How to Do Everything Wrong at an OCDS meeting.

The loving community was happy to accept me as a flawed newcomer and didn't say a word. When I was received into formation, I know that God smiled at me saying, “See, I knew you would get it!”

Let's begin with the question, Who Are We?

We are part of the family of God. *Constitutions #24a*, p. 12, tell us, the local community is a visible sign of the Church and the Order. Because Christ is the center of the Community, we meet regularly in His name. Just think about that for a minute. We meet regularly in the name of Jesus! We are all called to live in the unity requested by Jesus.

Do you remember St. Teresa of Jesus' model of community life? Her “ideal of community life is based on the certainty of faith that the risen Jesus is in the midst of the community and that it lives under the protection of the Virgin

Mary.” Not only are we reminded of this in our *Constitutions, III B, Fraternal Communion, #24b* but in St. Teresa’s books, Life and The Way of Perfection. Holy Mother Teresa realized how much we need support on this journey to prayer and how important it is to develop friendships with others who share in our search for God. These relations hold the virtue of a genuine love that is free and unselfish and shown by detachment and humility. *Constitutions III B* tell us these are fundamental virtues for the spiritual life and they bring peace both internally and externally.

The friars and nuns live in community. It is our job to make community with those who share our Catholic Christian identity in Carmel. We are committed to the Order and to the Church. This commitment is made in the form of the Promise. And, to whom do we make these promises? This is what our Promise states:

“Inspired by the Holy Spirit in response to God’s call, I sincerely promise to the Superiors of the Order of Teresian Carmel and to you my brothers and sisters” “And to you my brothers and sisters.” This is directly from the *O.C.D.S. Documents and Ritual for Promises and Vows. Constitutions VII, #48, p. 27* states “The General Superior, the Provincial Superior, and the Council of the Community are the legitimate superiors of the Secular Order.”

What does this mean? First the “General Superior” is Fr. Saverio Cannistra, OCD in Rome. Next, the “Provincial Superior” is Fr. Stephen Watson, OCD in Redlands. He works together with the friars’ Provincial Council. And last, “the Council of the Community.” I want to repeat this part, “the Council of the Community”. Fr. Aloysius Deeney, OCD our previous General Delegate for the Secular Order of Discalced Carmelites tells us, “Who is the superior of the community? THE COUNCIL. Not the president. The President is not the superior of the Council but the spokesperson for the Council.” It is the Council that makes the decisions of which the President is a member. The part of the Promise that says “and to you my brothers and sisters” means your community. Do you see how we are all related? We are not just seculars by ourselves.

Let’s get back to the community. An important part of the commitment made through the Promise, is the commitment to the community. Fr.

Deeney goes on to tell us “a person who wishes to be a member of the OCDS must be able to

(1) form community, (2) be a part of a group that is dedicated to a common goal, (3) show interest in other members, (4) be supportive in the pursuit of prayer and (5) be able to receive the support of others.” This information is taken from Fr. Deeney’s book, Welcome to the Secular Order of Discalced Carmelites, “Testing and Discerning a Vocation”, p. 17.

Being part of a community and being part of forming that community is what happens at meetings. As we experience community, we experience the movement and guidance of the Holy Spirit which helps us to grow in virtues. It is through this experience that we hear the call “to be perfect just as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Mt. 5:48) which moves us to live three important principles of Carmel. 1. “To give ourselves entirely to God.” 2. “To strive for purity of conscience.” 3. “To foster an intimate union with God.” We cannot do this alone. It is with the support of our community/group that we are able to grow.

What Is A Meeting? *Statutes XIII*, “Organization and Life”, #3, p. 11, tells us, “A monthly meetings should encapsulate the ideal daily Carmelite life: a conference by the Spiritual Assistant, quiet prayer, fraternal charity, the Liturgy of the Hours, devotion to Mary, formation, time for socializing and business as necessary. In order to accomplish this, the meeting ideally should be no less than four hours in length.”

Let’s talk about the length of the meetings. Four hours is the ideal but Groups and sometimes Communities cannot reach this. For example a Group of three people would really struggle to fill in four hours while a Community of fifty might not have any problem at all. It is a goal to work for. Again it is a goal to work toward not something you must try to change immediately. Four hours should be the maximum. For a meeting to last five hours or longer would be much too long. Remember not to make your meetings so long that they become a hardship to the members.

Strike a balance in the content. For example, you wouldn’t want to have 2 hours of social time and 30 minutes of formation. Again in the *Statutes XIII*, “Organization and Life”, #3, p. 11 the parts of a meeting are defined as:

- Conference by the Spiritual Assistant
- Quiet Prayer
- Liturgy of the Hours
- Devotion to Mary
- Social Time
- Business as necessary
- Formation

Formation

We gain information through our Formation classes in various stages from Aspirancy, those preparing for the First Promise and those preparing for the Definitive Promise and yes, those who have made the Definitive Promise and Vows. We are not like biscuits. We are never done once and for all.

Let me say a word about Vows. This information comes from *Constitutions VII, "Organization and Government,"* #39, p. 24. "With the consent of the Council of the community and the permission of the Provincial, a member of the Secular Order may make vows of obedience and chastity in the presence of the community. These vows are personal and optional and don't create a separate category of membership."

Statutes, Sec. XI: Formation Guidelines, #2, p. 10, says, "All professed members shall be provided with a copy of the OCDS Formation Guidelines for the California-Arizona Province of St. Joseph. At the discretion of the Community Council, the Formation Guidelines may also be distributed to Candidates preparing for the Temporary Promise." This is the official Formation Program for our Province. If you don't have a copy, it may be found at www.ocds.info. This document is invaluable and contains so much helpful information.

Now let's review the *Formation Guidelines*, Table of Contents, page v. Some of the things I would like to draw your attention to include:

- Guidance with Stages of Formation, p. 9
- Information about Accountability, p. 27

- Multiple Resources to provide information on “Writing a Syllabus” p. 93A-9, “Writing a Lesson Plan” p. 93A-12, “Discernment” p.83, “Impediments to Joining the Secular Order” p. 79 and more.
- There are “*Tools for Use in Formation*” p. 95 that include “*Principles for Leading Discussions*”, “*Teaching Methods*” an example of successful Formation and organizational charts.
- And, hello! Instructions for praying the Liturgy of the Hours.

In addition there are Formation checklists and forms for Aspirancy , Formation I, and Formation II. There are many helpful forms for Formators on p. 103 – 127 and p. 162 – 173.

Remember your Formation Program must be flexible enough to adapt to the circumstances of each person who is to become a member.

Now let’s turn to another point. Who is responsible for formation of a community/group? *Constitutions*, Section VII, #46 p. 26, tell us “The primary responsibility of the Council is the formation and Christian Carmelite maturing of the members.” At the 2014 Atlanta OCDS Congress, Fr. Alzinir Debastiani, O.C.D. our current General Delegate for the Secular Order of Discalced Carmelites was very clear when he made this point. The council is responsible for the formation of ALL members including those who have already made the Definitive Promise. What does this mean? We ALL participate in ongoing study, stay involved and continue growing in Carmelite spirituality.

He went on to say, “The collective and individual responsibility of the Community for formation requires that each individual member commit to fraternal communion, in the belief that spirituality of communion plays an essential role in the deepening of the spiritual life and formation process.”

We do this with faith, love and humility. We create a true sense of family. We encourage dialogue, we make and encourage personal sacrifice, forgiveness and reconciliation. We avoid all attachment to power and

favoritism. This is all found in the *Constitution*, Section IIIB, Fraternal Communion on p. 12.

Statutes X, #5, p. 10, says, “Ongoing Formation is the responsibility of each definitively professed member: and it should be pursued in accordance with the *Formation Guidelines* and *Constitutions*, #34 pg. 21. The *Formation Guidelines* also remind us “the entire Community welcomes and accompanies the Aspirant on their journey of discernment and mentors the Aspirants in all aspects of OCDS life.

Cooperation is critical among the President, Formation Director and Councilors for a successful Formation Program.

The Ratio

What is *The Ratio*? If you don't have a copy go to www.ocds.info. Click on “Legislative Documents”, scroll down and click on “*Ratio Institutionis*.”

The *Ratio* is a document which presents the fundamental principles that guide the process of formation. It reminds us, in the *Ratio*, No. 2, 3 and 4, that “the primary responsibility of the defined authority according to the *OCDS Constitutions* is the formation of the entire Community. Governance, in the sense of control or organization is a secondary and supportive role to the primary purpose. If Formation is adequate, governance becomes minimal. “ What does this mean? Formation of the whole community in Carmelite spirituality is the primary duty of the community. And, if Formation is on track, problems requiring some sort of intervention should be minimal. Furthermore, it cross references to the *Constitutions*, #32, p.21 and states the purpose of formation is “to prepare the person to live the spirituality of Carmel.”

Now let's talk about some practical aspect of a meeting. I had the pleasure of hearing a workshop on meetings at the Atlanta Congress in August 2014 given by Chad Cooper, O.C.D.S., from Mary, Queen of Carmel Community in Conyers, GA and I would like to share some of the ideas with you.

What is the purpose of a meeting? Unlike a civic or secular meeting that focuses on decision making and governance, the focus of an OCDS meeting is Formation. Whose job is decision making? The Council. The only

exception to this is the election where the community at large makes decision by their vote.

Maintaining Order

We don't have a prescribed rule book for OCDS meetings because we don't make decisions or govern during this time. How your business meeting runs is dictated by the size of your community or group. Larger meetings require more formality, for example, using the Roberts Rule of Order. Smaller groups of people will be informal but you still need some form of structure. Even if the number of people is small, when you have powerful personalities and very quiet people, you'll need more structure.

What Happens At a Meeting?

Know the relevant parts of the *Constitutions* and *Statutes* that discuss meetings and Council meetings. Have your personal copy with you to be able to check and reference issues.

The flow of the meeting is controlled by an agenda. You'll spend more time on important issues and a shorter time on issues of less importance.

Get to know the pace of the members. Pay attention when interactions are going on to be sure quiet members have a chance to speak. As President, you have the ability to get other input when someone is dominating. Ensure that input is gathered in such a way as to allow everyone to participate.

When the President is Absent

When the President is absent, *Constitutions*, #53, p. 28, instruct us that the Formation Director is the substitute for any function.

Tips for the President

- Be flexible

Know when to be flexible and know when not to be flexible. Don't be so rigid that we might do silly things. Strike a happy medium. Some rules can't be bent such as those rules given in the *Constitutions* and *Statutes*.

Remember the Council makes the decisions. The community doesn't vote to override the Council.

Let's look at an example. The Council has determined and set the meeting day schedule and time for each section of the meeting. The members decide they would like to cut out Formation and have a pot luck. Two hours will be required to take from the meeting for food prep, eating and visiting and clean-up. Would this be ok? NO. This would not be negotiable. An example of something that might be flexible in comparison are changes to the business meeting agenda to improve the meeting flow.

- Plan the Meeting and Start on Time

If you start by spontaneous combustion when the President walks in, the meeting will appear scattered. Even if you're really good, it will appear scattered. Plan ahead, start on time, and demonstrate organization. This sets the tone of the meeting. Otherwise, you will be playing catch up the entire time.

- Preside With Impartiality

This is always important in all communities/groups but especially in large communities and in dealing with issues causing a great deal of excitement and disagreement. The President is not allowed to take sides particularly at community meetings. It is the job of the President to help the flow of discussion back and forth, make sure tempers don't get too heated, and things stay in control. If you pick one side, then the other side will consider you as being partial to the issue. Remember as soon as you step in, there is no going back. Members of the Council might be assigned to speak on your behalf in order that you as a President may remain impartial.

- Never Give Up Control of the Meeting

You might see this in a meeting if there is a special class or presentation. The President might say, "Johnny Cross is going to take over now." Wrong. You're still responsible to see that the meeting doesn't leave the rails. Stay mentally engaged, watch to see that members are engaged and track time. You are ultimately responsible for running the entire meeting.

- Sit In a Place Where You Can Run the Meeting

We Carmelites are humble and don't enjoy being the center of attention. However, there is a time and place for demonstrating authority in a meeting. Stand when you speak so that everyone can see you. Use a microphone so that everyone can hear you. This is especially important in large communities. Place chairs for the community that will facilitate good interaction. This will prevent problems down the road when you might have to step in to keep things running smoothly and on track.

- Trust Your Instincts

Use tact and good sense. Remember running meetings is not why you were elected. You are the best reflection of the community. Allow that to reflect how you preside.

- Getting Off On Tangents

This can happen in all meetings. An example might be something like you are discussing upcoming plans for your Community sponsored Rosary Procession. Someone may volunteer for a particular service then begin sharing that praying the Rosary inspired them to visit a particular Marian Shrine, then start giving details of the recent visit. Allow a little flexibility and then bring the topic back. Have in mind a time unit. It might be sixty seconds or two to three minutes. If you don't bring things back on topic, people will check out and eyes will start to glaze over.

- Stay Above the Fray

Be neutral enough that you don't become so personally invested that you become part of the fray. Mentor, monitor and keep on track. If you get pulled in and you find yourself arguing, you've lost the point. Stay detached enough to stay in control and bring things back on line. Difficulties should be resolved in Council meetings instead of allowing altercations to occur in meetings.

- Define Up Front What Is OK and What is Not OK

In order to make steady progress, our monthly meetings must be focused on Carmelite spirituality. "Out of respect for our shared commitment to

Carmel, we refrain from bringing personal devotional material into the meetings. Our mature devotion to Our Lady of Mt. Carmel and our love for our holy founders will move us to keep our sharing at meetings focused on Carmelite topics.” (*Statutes X*, “The Period of Formation” #5, p. 10 and *Constitutions*, #34 and #36, p. 21 and 22 and *Formation Guidelines* “Specifics for All Stages of Formation”.)

Let me give you an example. At first, a comment may fit but soon it might spin off and be a full blown debate. It’s tough to bring order back after the fact and may appear that you are taking sides of an issue. This also applies to political issues. You might say something like this. “Although this discussion might be interesting to some, it’s not what we’re here for. We only have a few hours to be together once a month and it is so important to stay focused on Carmel. It’s taking us away from Carmel. What you do in your personal time is up to you but in the meeting itself, let’s keep discussions on track with our purpose for being here.”

If you state this up front, you are doing your job and not taking sides. Set expectations up front then consistently follow through. We meet once a month. Important things must occur. If things fall apart one time you can’t just let it go and fix things later. You must step in. You can’t waste the time of all the other people present if two people are arguing. You cannot allow an argument. Time that’s lost can’t be reclaimed. Be brave, have courage and allow the Council to resolve the issue.

- Poll the Community for Advice

I mentioned earlier that the Council is the body for decision making. It is ok, however, to poll the community for advice. It might go something like this. “The Council has to make a decision about where we will have our annual retreat and we would like your input. Could I see a show of hands? Would you prefer Location X or Location Y?”

This way the Council is not excluding the opinion of the community. At the same time, the community Council maintains the ultimate authority. Then you might add, “That’s valuable information. We will discuss this in the next Council meeting and let you know the decision.

- Delegate

By delegating the various elements of the meeting time, the President needs only to prepare for the business meeting and is free to “show fraternal service to all the members of the community (and) foster a spirit of Christian and Carmelite affability, (while) being careful to avoid any demonstration of preference for some members over others.....” (*Constitutions VII*, “Organization and Government”, #51, p. 27 and 28.) This is necessary for preparing others for future roles in the community as well as allowing people to feel an integrated part of the community.

- Aspirants

Be a guardian angel. Get to know the Aspirants. Sit with them during the Liturgy of the Hours and help them learn their way. There are many ways to be a guardian angel. They are becoming part of your family in Carmel. “Sufficient contact with a Community is understood to entail an Aspirant’s attendance at the meetings of the Community for not less than 1 full year. (cf. Const. #36a). If it is in the best interest of the Aspirant, this period may be extended for another year; but in no case longer than two years.” (*Statutes IX*, #4, pg. 9.) This allows an Aspirant who has been absent perhaps for valid reasons but who has missed valuable information a time to catch up and at the same time allow the community to further observe indications of a vocation.

- Visitors

The Province’s Visitor’s Policy is found in *Statutes IX*, #5, p. 9 and reads, “Visitors will preferably have a conversation with the President or Director Of Formation before attending their first meeting.” Then it goes on to define what the visitor will be told ahead of time introducing them to the Carmelite Secular way of life and requirements of each member. “The schedule of the portion of the meeting-day they are invited to attend will be outlined along with the expectations for participation. Visitors can benefit from continuing attendance at meetings while waiting for an Aspirancy class to begin. There will be someone assigned to guide them through the meeting, unless they

have already come with a member.” Make visitors feel welcome and be sure to introduce them to the community. I mentioned earlier about assigning “guardian angels” to help new comers feel comfortable and learn what we are all about. “During this period, visitors may have the option of attending a formation class at the discretion of the Council. They should not attend the business meeting while confidential matters, such as the treasurer’s report are discussed. Once the Council has approved the visitor to begin an aspirant’s formation class, they must either join the class or no longer come to meetings.

- Attendance

Statutes XIII, “Organization and Life”, # 4, p. 11 outlines the Province’s Attendance Policy. In this Statute we are told that Community life is central to the Teresian Carmelite charism. Attendance at monthly meetings is required. This Statute gives guidance for the Council to follow in dealing with attendance issues. So let’s stop and consider what an “attendance issue” might be. This Statute section goes on to say “Sometimes there are unavoidable demands on the secular state of life that prevent a member from being present. For Communities and Groups, a minimum of nine out of twelve meetings each year is required to progress to the next stage of formation.” If a member misses fewer than 9 out of 12 meetings is it a problem? No. Communication with the Community is made when there is a compelling reason why one cannot attend a meeting but the member is not penalized for missing one or two meeting a year for good reason. When someone misses a meeting, how nice it is for a member to make contact in charity to ensure the wellbeing of the person and demonstrate fraternal love.

In concluding I want to share an experience my husband and I had at a restaurant. A family with three young girls came in and were seated across from us. After their food arrived, there was great excitement to determine who would bless the food. Finally, one of the youngest of the children was chosen. She bowed her head, folded her little hands and shut her eyes tightly in concentration, then began; “I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America and to the republic, for which it stands, one nation, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all. Amen. Phew!”

This was a dear little girl, a good little girl, well intended but just a little misdirected.

We are all good people, good Catholics and striving to be good Carmelites. Without the knowledge of our *Constitutions, Statutes and Formation Guidelines*, we just may be like the little girl I described, a dear and good child of God but somewhat misdirected. If we know and understand Carmelite spirituality we will be able to share it and grow as authentic Carmelites.

I would like to leave you with this thought when planning meetings.

Our Holy Mother Saint Teresa of Jesus tells us, love makes everything easy. “...Love begets love...Let us strive to keep this divine love always before our eyes and to waken ourselves to love. For if at some time the Lord should favor us by impressing this love on our hearts, all will become easy for us, and we shall carry out our tasks quickly and without much effort. May His Majesty give (us) this love...” (Life, Ch. 22:14.)

Let's continue praying for each other.