

A Model for Secular Order Meetings – Some Practical Guides

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Praise be Jesus Christ, Now and Forever!

I thought to myself, as I was asked to prepare this talk, what should a Carmelite community or group meeting consist of? Or for purposes of this talk, what should a Secular Order meeting look like besides what I already was familiar with in my own meetings? So, as I initially began perusing through the Constitutions, low and behold in #24b, it says that “St. Teresa of Jesus initiated a new model of community life. (Well, that peeked my interest). Then it continues to say that “...her ideal of community life was based on the certainty of faith that the Risen Jesus was in the midst of the community and that it lives under the protection of the Virgin Mary. She was aware that she and her nuns were gathered together to help the Church and to collaborate in its mission.” Although we are not in a monastery with a group of nuns and friars, isn’t this what Secular Carmelites are all about as we come together in our meetings? Can this model be applied to our Secular Order meetings? Of course it can, big time and it should! It is so simple, yet profound, in what is expressed here in this Constitution, if you really think about it. Margaret Shore will also bring this Constitution up again as she links it with her talk about Generosity in Spirit.

The Rule of St. Albert also expresses of the Spirituality of Carmel, which was written for the laypeople who gathered on Mount Carmel, to live a life dedicated to meditation on the Word of God, under the protection of Our Lady.¹ This was important to the Brothers as they gathered on Mt. Carmel. And, it should also be important to us.

Let’s first review the principles of what guides our Secular Carmelite way of Life:²

- a) Living in allegiance to Jesus Christ;
- b) Being diligent in meditation on the law of the Lord;
- c) Giving time to spiritual reading;
- d) Participating in the Church’s Liturgy, both the Eucharist and the Liturgy of the Hours;

¹ OCDS Constitutions, Our Identity, Values and Commitment, #6, pg. 17

² OCDS Constitutions, Our Identity, Values and Commitment, #9, pg. 19

- e) Being concerned for the needs and the good of others in the community;
- f) Arming ourselves with the practice of the virtues, as we live an intense life of faith, hope and charity;
- g) Seeking interior silence and solitude in our life of prayer;
- h) Using prudent discretion on all we do

All of these principles should be fostered and expressed in our communities and groups as well as our daily life.

So what isn't an OCDS community or group meeting? It is not a prayer group, rosary group, social gathering, gossip sharing, a place to escape from family, a Scripture study, or book study club. The list can go on and on...and you may have some examples as well.

We need and should refer to our legislation as our guide. It is easy to forget that the Constitutions and the Statutes give us direction and guidance for many things. Specifically, what are some of the basics needed to have a good foundation in our meetings? Some of them are:

- 1) Committed members who seek to grow in the spiritual life within the Carmelite Order through the teachings & writings of our Carmelite saints
- 2) A deep devotion and love for Our Blessed Mother, especially since we belong to Her Order
- 3) Faithful prayer warriors or as St. Teresa says in the *Way of Perfection* that in her foundations "...that these few friends be good ones."
- 4) The willingness to grow in humility and docility to learn and be taught
- 5) The desire to be of service to the Order and the Church

We begin here, because without some of these basic essentials, there is no real purpose for our Carmelite Secular Order meetings.

As Seculars, we are in the world. We come together only once a month, if that. It should be a great joy when that day arrives for us to be together again to teach, to learn, to pray, and to support one another in our vocation. And, yes, we cannot over emphasize that our membership in the Secular Order is a vocation—a very special calling and we should never stop expressing this to our members. What makes it so special is our commitment to the Order. Hence, attendance and participation in our meetings are very important.

(Sec. XIII: Organization and Life #3 “Lack of regular attendance without excuse or notification is a negative indication of a vocation.”) Let’s take a minute to read #3 on page 64 in our Legislative Documents booklet: It says that “Because communal life is central to the Teresian Carmelite charism, attendance at the monthly meetings is required. [*cf. Const. #24c*]. Every Community /Group will keep its own written attendance record. 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 or at least 75% attendance every year, is required to progress to the next level of formation [*cf. #24c; Provincial Statutes Sec. X, para. 2 & 4*]. Similarly, a minimum of nine out of twelve meetings or at least 75% attendance prior to the election, is required for voting within a Community/Group or serving on the Council.” Formators should keep emphasizing the importance of attendance because, sadly, many people do tend to drop out after the final promise.

Remember the six “M’s:”³

- 1) Meditation
- 2) Morning Prayer, Evening Prayer, and if you can, Night Prayer
- 3) Mass
- 4) Mary
- 5) Meetings
- 6) Mission

All of these are part of a Secular Carmelite’s life or what specifically encompasses our way of life in Carmel. Since I am talking about Secular Carmelite meetings, what do we find in them? There should be formation, information, and fellowship as part of the meeting. But as Fr. Aloysius Deeney says so well, in his chapter about the six M’s, in the book entitled *Welcome to the Secular Order of Discalced Carmelites* “...it is not only a formation of individuals, but also the formation of a community as a community. It is a community of people who have made a commitment to each other.”⁴ That is why we come together.

³ Welcome to the Secular Order of Discalced Carmelites, P. Aloysius Deeney, OCD, pgs.27-35

⁴ Welcome to the Secular Order of Discalced Carmelites, P. Aloysius Deeney, OCD pg.30

Under Sec XIII – Organization and Life #2 in our Statutes, we are also told what communities and groups need to include in their meetings:

- 1) Meeting once a month exercising fraternal charity for one another
- 2) Formation
- 3) A spiritual conference by the Spiritual Assistant
- 4) Quiet or Recollected Prayer
- 5) The Liturgy of the Hours
- 6) Devotion to Mary
- 7) Time for Socializing
- 8) Business as Necessary
- 9) Preferably no more than 4 hours in length

So let me break these down a bit and share some thoughts:

- 1) **Meeting once a month** – Stick to a set time and date for your meetings; a regular location is a must to be consistent; perhaps think about having contact information in the church bulletin for those who may be interested in discerning a vocation. Those of us who meet in a parish may, on occasion, have to change the date of our meeting to accommodate a church event or activity. Hopefully, this does not occur too often. Nevertheless, we should be flexible as the Pastor is allowing us to meet on the church premises. A good communication tree by telephone and/or email is very important to notify members. There may be occasion where even a meeting has to be cancelled due to natural disasters, such as most recently the wildfires, rain, and subsequent mudslides that devastated a lot of the Santa Barbara/Montecito area. The Santa Barbara Community was directly impacted by this and they are still recovering.
- 2) **Meetings should include formation** - Selection of good Formators to teach the various stages in formation is necessary; they should be committed people with the guidance of the Director of Formation; we should refer to the Formation Guidelines for the different levels of formation and what is necessary to be taught. You can simplify the study of the homework and lesson planning by selecting the important points of a chapter in a book for discussion and emphasis. Ideally, I would also suggest, if possible, to even have an assistant formator to help and sub

if the one formator is sick or cannot attend the meeting. This will help build leadership and train new formators for the future.

- 3) **A Spiritual Conference by a Spiritual Assistant** – This is tough, because we don't have enough of our Carmelite Friars to go around to be Spiritual Assistants to all of our communities and groups, especially in more remote locations. But don't despair. Continue to look for a priest, religious, sister, or deacon who can come once a month or often to give your group or community a talk on the spiritual life or on a topic you choose on a Carmelite saint or Carmelite spirituality. It's good to give them some idea on a topic with time for them to prepare. So, don't give up looking for someone. In the interim, there are many good CDs and may be even good DVDs from the various OCDS Congresses that can be shared with the whole community or group and then have some discussion and sharing. Look for ways to be creative yet provide the spiritual teaching that members can benefit and grow in their spiritual life. You may also have some gifted Secular members who can make presentations and you should tap on their skills. There is also a site introduced by Teresa Basnage, of the Santa Clara community, called: the_speakroom.org which has excellent conferences by many of our Carmelite Friars and Brothers and even OCDS members, including meditations some as short as 10 minutes or even 20 minutes. It can also be found on Facebook at: <https://www.facebook.com/thespeakroom>. And, we should, most importantly, avail ourselves of the podcasts, which continues to be developed, on our own website ocds.info.
- 4) **Quiet or Recollected Prayer** – Many communities or groups do this in different ways. For example, my group chooses to spend between 20-30 minutes after our Liturgy of the Hours to practice the prayer of recollection in silence with about 10 minutes of Gregorian chant in the beginning to help in our recollection and then the remainder in silence. Then concluded by a short prayer by one of our Councilors. But, I have noticed that other communities or groups choose this time to practice Lectio Divina and this is fine as well. Alternating between the two might be a thought for every other month. The main emphasis is to practice these forms of prayer so that we can make a habit of it in our daily life.

- 5) **Liturgy of the Hours** – All communities and groups should definitely come together to pray the Liturgy of the Hours, whether it be for Morning or Evening Prayer. This is dependent upon the time you meet. Always remind members that the way we recite this prayer in a group is different from the way we recite it on our own, so the cadence and tempo is slower and deliberate. There is an excellent podcast with an example on how to recite the Liturgy of the Hours in community on our ocds.info website presented by Cherry Caparas, OCDS from the San Jose Community. Teach this method to your members and follow the format provided in our Formation Guidelines on pages 153-156. Some members may experience difficulty at first and may even feel uncomfortable with this method, but once every one becomes more familiar, think of how much more enriching and meaningful the community's or group's prayer will become. Alternate leaders every couple of months, so that all your members may have an opportunity to lead and learn. We cannot over emphasize how important this is to help members build confidence and grow in leadership.
- 6) **Devotion to Mary** – A good way to show devotion and love for Mary is for members to wear their ceremonial scapular to the meetings; May be have a table set up with a statute of Our Lady with some flowers or candle in Her honor or display your banners, if you have one-- keeping Her ever present to the members during the meeting and as a reminder of Her presence among us. A concluding hymn in Her honor like the Salve Regina or Flos Carmeli would be a way of celebrating and sending off your members in joyful thanksgiving to Her as we go back to our homes and busy lives.
- 7) **Time for Socializing** – This is a special time to mingle among the community and group members; Meeting new aspirants or newcomers; and sharing the joy of our vocation with others. You might consider appointing members to become greeters and even mentors to newcomers, introducing them to other members, so they feel welcome and part of the community or group. The social is really not a time to do Council work, but to share snacks and pleasant conversation with one another. We should encourage members to get to know one another better. If you have a hospitality committee in your group or community that can set up coffee or refreshments, snacks, etc., that would also encourage members to get up from

their chairs and speak with others. Food is usually a good incentive and may help to spark a conversation.

- 8) **Business as Necessary** – Meetings should have some time set aside to discuss any important announcements or important business of the Order to share. This time could include the monthly collection of donations for community expenses or other OCDS or OCD projects, such as Congress funds, retreats, fundraising, etc.
- 9) **Preferably no more than 4 hours in length** – Preferably, our meetings should not be less than 4 hours in length. The key word here is “preferably.”

Since we only meet once a month, we should do our best to maximize this special time together as a community or group. To help guide our meetings, it is good to have an agenda/schedule prepared and distributed to the members. This has always been helpful to provide all important announcements, dates to remember, upcoming events, page numbers for the Liturgy of the Hours, and listing of prayer requests for those in our community or group who are ill, etc. The agenda, along with the minutes of the meeting, can be mailed to those who are not able to attend the meeting so they are kept in the loop of what is going on. It can be very simple and useful. For example:

- a) Angelus & Liturgy of the Hours – 30 mins.
- b) Quiet Prayer/Lectio Divina – 30 mins.
- c) Social Gathering– 30 mins.
- d) Formation Classes – 60 mins.
- e) Spiritual Conference – 45 mins. (30 mins for talk & 15 mins for Q&A)
- f) General Business – 30 mins.
- g) Concluding Prayers/Salve Regina/Flos Carmeli – 15 mins.

Of course, all of these times can change and your meeting may run over or under. Smaller groups or communities could extend their social time, formation classes, Lectio Divina, or Spiritual Conference discussion, to make their gathering together more fruitful and meaningful. Having said this, however, there are smaller groups that may not be able to meet a full four hours as the larger groups do, since they may not have as much business to discuss or plan.

Another point I want to make, which I touched upon earlier, is that we should have some kind of communication tree via email or telephone to keep our members apprised of any

serious emergencies, prayer requests, death announcements, funeral services for members, changes in meeting location, times, cancellations of meetings, reminders, etc., if needed. So, it's very important to keep your rosters with phone numbers and emails up to date. And, remind members to look for such emails, especially prior to your meeting.

In conclusion, every community and group has some form of autonomy on how they run their meetings. But, there is always room for improvement and it's good to share what works. If we follow the guidance of our legislation, we cannot go wrong and no matter where we go in the Province, we should see some or all of the elements mentioned here followed by any group or community meeting that we attend.

In all things, be flexible. Situations may occur which necessitate an adjustment to your schedule and that's okay. We do the best we can under the circumstances. Just keep your members informed, keep your cool, and continue to run your meeting with fraternal charity.

Always remember, one of our main roles as the governing body or in leadership, is one of service to one another and especially in our Secular Order meetings.

Thank you and God bless.