

SPECIFICS FOR ALL STAGES OF FORMATION

In any formation program, it is important to draw deeply from the springs of Carmel, so that our actions may bear the fruit that comes from the treasures of our Order and of things divine. The word “Carmel” means “garden.” Our hearts and souls are meant to be as inner quiet gardens where the Holy Trinity dwells continually.

Formation teams must take to heart St. John of the Cross’s teaching that “...the principal guide is the Holy Spirit, who is never neglectful of souls ... the whole concern of directors should not be to accommodate souls to their own method and condition, but they should observe the road along which God is leading one ... [I]n harmony with the path and the spirit along which God leads a soul, the spiritual director should strive to conduct it into greater solitude, tranquility, and freedom of spirit” (*Living Flame*, 3:46).

The formation program, founded on personal interaction, is intended to bridge the written words of our legislation and the living vocation that is life in Carmel. A good formation program provides detailed instruction which is tailored to the needs of each community, and helps us integrate the Rule, the *OCDS Constitutions*, and our promise into our daily lives. The council of each community has the responsibility to present these formation guidelines with humility and patience. The spiritual assistant, and everyone in the community, needs to have a copy of them so that, with adequate preparation, they can contribute to a formation program that is consistent with the objectives of our *OCDS Constitutions*. Sharing the plan in this way provides for the possibility of mutual empowerment and accountability in its implementation.

The guidelines presented here state our objectives, list the essential materials, and indicate the time frames and basic curriculum for each stage of formation. The curriculum does not provide the specific plan and supplementary materials for each formation session. This allows freedom and creativity in meeting the various needs of the individuals in formation.

Accountability and written assignments

Since holding ourselves accountable is so crucial to the success of a community's formation program, we have devoted an entire section of the guidelines to it. Used with charity, accountability enables us to reach the goals we set, while limiting the risk of going astray.

We highly recommend written assignments for every stage of initial formation (that is, before the Definitive Promise). When well designed, they deepen our interaction with the themes in the curriculum and provide an opportunity to articulate personal reflections. They also serve as an excellent aid in discerning the call to Carmel. Completing a brief essay or short questionnaire each month gives an indication of our attraction to the deeper study of Carmelite spirituality. It also demonstrates our ability to follow through on commitments. Individual circumstances may require additional flexibility. See pages 97 through 122 for general principles and models for leading discussions and developing written assignments.

Because our rich Carmelite heritage provides for a lifetime of ever deepening study, the definitively professed can also benefit from written assignments, although their circumstances may permit greater flexibility in this regard. The definitively professed do well to maintain the attitude of beginners and return frequently to reread the foundational works of our Carmelite saints.

An extensive curriculum

Those who are beginners in Carmel have an extensive curriculum to cover in six to eight years as they prepare for the Definitive Promise. With clear communication among the Director of Formation, the other members of the Council and the Spiritual Assistant, topics can be addressed during the monthly meeting that supplement the hour-long formation study session. For example, a meeting themed on the meaning of the Mass could include a relevant reading from one of our Carmelite saints, a conference by the Spiritual Assistant based on a selected Church document, a meditation on Scripture, and reading brief selections from our Rule and *OCDS Constitutions*. If our meetings usually

include some reference to each of the above, we are continually reminded of the many sources of encouragement in our Carmelite pursuit of holiness.

Carmel is our focus

In order to make steady progress, our monthly meetings must be focused especially on Carmelite spirituality, while providing an adequate opportunity to take care of the business of the community. Out of respect for our shared commitment to Carmel, we refrain from bringing personal devotional materials 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.

One of the special times set apart for prayer noted in our *OCDS Constitutions*, paragraph 20, is the annual community retreat. It constitutes an integral part of the formation program. Similarly, we take particular advantage of periodic days of recollection as a privileged time for prayerful discernment of God's will.

Discernment

Careful discernment of God's will, especially as each candidate approaches another stage of formation, is vital for the good of the community and the Order itself. Carmel is for the Church and the world, but not everyone is called to Carmel. As we pray with and for inquirers and candidates, we help discern the way of life God intends for their growth in holiness. God instills a Carmelite vocation as an integral part of our identity, a part that must be developed through formation. No amount of effort can create it if He has not instilled it.

The entire period of initial formation, from Aspirancy to the Definitive Promise, is a time of discernment about the validity of a person's vocation to Carmel. The process of discernment requires trust in God's love so that we can be patient and open to His lead. As we grow in humility and detachment from our opinions and desires and surrender to the ongoing process of discernment, we pray, listen, seek, learn, and evaluate. It cannot be a solitary activity because a person can easily be captivated by a false self-image that

needs to be tested. Formators, and indeed the entire community, must be prayerful, welcoming, and careful to avoid rushing to judgment. We must also recognize that some people who greatly admire Carmelite spirituality and are deeply devoted to the Virgin Mary, will flourish better on a path other than ours. *¹ It is charity to let them find the place where God will most bless them.

With these principles in mind, let us examine the core objectives, curriculum, and resources for each stage of formation.

* See *Discernment of OCDS Vocation*, by Fr. Aloysius Deeney, OCD, reproduced in this volume, p. 43

