

SOME THOUGHTS ON THE FIRST STEPS IN THE SECULAR ORDER OF DISCALCED CARMELITES (THE ASPIRANCY PERIOD)

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The period of aspirancy in the Secular Order is the most critical time, both for the candidate and for the community. This is the time when both parties have the opportunity, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to discern a vocation to the Carmelite Order. It could not be a more important period and the new Constitutions have underpinned that point by extending it to one year.

For the OCDS community considering the candidate, this is a crucial time because the Council of that community has an awesome responsibility to the person being considered and to the Order itself. Fr. Aloysius Deeney, OCD has emphasized the seriousness of our position in this regard many times and has laid down guidelines for us to follow when deciding if an aspirant or candidate is to be accepted into the Secular Order. It is vital that we no longer slip into the pattern, in a mistaken idea of being charitable, that anyone who takes the trouble to come to meetings should be accepted into the Order. It is essential, from the very first day, that aspirants be educated carefully in the charism, the Rule of St. Albert, the Constitutions, and the expectations of the Order. The responsibility is definitely twofold -- for the aspirant and for the community -- but, unlike the practices of the past, it is wise to realize that the real burden lies with the community. This is because candidates often feel that they should be Carmelites, for various reasons, notwithstanding what is obviously clear to the contrary to the Council and/or the community. If we are truthful with ourselves as OCDS communities, we will admit that people without vocations have been accepted simply because we have been reluctant to say no. Because of the reluctance to deny persons, the Council then has to live with that decision and the problems that may arise for the community in the future. Since it is true that it takes six years before a person makes Definitive Profession, there is a theory that the community and candidate have plenty of time to discern the vocation, but with each step forward in the formation process, a candidate can and often does feel entitled to acceptance. If there are problems in the beginning, that is the time for the community to take the courageous step of denial. This is fairer to both the aspirant and to the community.

A twelve month period of aspirancy is not actually that long, especially considering the fact that it only consists of twelve meetings. For that reason, it behooves communities to keep the aspirancy class size fairly small (no more than twelve), so that the teacher can get to know each person. Because the Council of the community must decide whether or not an aspirant will be accepted into the community, it makes sense that the teacher should be one of the members of the existing Council.

The period of aspirancy could be called the honeymoon period for the aspirant and the community. This is the time when there is a great rush of enthusiasm and an awareness of new beginnings. It is important to put aspirants at ease, to welcome them warmly, and to introduce them to the spirituality of the Carmelite Order. However, aspirants need to know from the outset that they will be expected to live the life of Carmelite Secular

members from day one. That is why requiring weekly reading of the Constitutions is so vital. That is why the Aspirant class should not be a matter of the teacher simply giving aspirants information, but one of constant checking that they actually understand and that they are doing their best to live the life. The teacher cannot possibly help a candidate to discern his/her vocation without constant interaction. Questions have to be asked, expectations have to be fulfilled, and checking for understanding has to take place constantly.

Aspirants cannot go into the formal period of formation without being firmly grounded in the Constitutions and without actually having lived the life of Carmelite Seculars for a full year (or more, if deemed necessary). For this reason, it is incumbent upon communities to make the year of aspirancy one of in-depth study of the Constitutions and the charism of the Order.

Teachers of aspirants can only know what aspirants are doing, believing, and understanding if they ask. This is the time to ascertain if aspirants are rooted in prayer, are willing to be obedient to the requirements of the Constitutions, and are actively studying on their own. The teacher and the community cannot assume anything; they must find out directly from the aspirant. In the past, how many members have gone forward into formation and beyond who do not know the Constitutions thoroughly, who live the life half-heartedly because they do not really understand the implications of a lifetime commitment, who think of the Order as a social-religious group, and who are caught up in borderline superstitious ideas and activities? If we are honest with ourselves as communities, the answer is more than we like to admit.

That is why there is nothing wrong with asking, with actively testing for comprehension (in writing), and with inviting each aspirant to talk about how he or she is living the life of a Carmelite. All of these things can be done in a warm, congenial atmosphere that makes aspirants aware of what they are undertaking and of how seriously the community takes their vocation and the responsibilities that come with that vocation.

It should be made eminently clear to newcomers that membership in the Secular Order is a calling from God to a specific way of life and that God may not necessarily be calling every person who comes as a beginner to our meetings. There is no "shame" attached to not being called to Carmel. Persons who do not remain with us should be helped, through prayer and guidance, to realize that God has other things in mind for them if they choose not to continue or if they are not accepted. If the Council finds it necessary to deny acceptance, this is the time for the teacher and the Council to explain charitably and carefully that the person should pray to be open to whatever God has in mind for him/her as an individual, and that God has provided a wonderful variety of ways to serve Him through the gifts He has given each of us.