

WRITING A SYLLABUS

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Before we begin to talk about writing a syllabus, we should demystify the words curriculum, syllabus, and to a lesser extent lesson plan.

As directors of formation, you have received the curriculum for the six year program of formation in the Secular Order.

- A *curriculum* is simply a plan for a course of study in a particular subject or subjects. It lays out what will be included in a course, the objectives and outcomes, and the materials that will be used. Our OCDS curriculum outlines the required materials to be covered in the formation program, while providing each community with the freedom to determine the manner in which they will be implemented.
- Using the curriculum as the guide, a *syllabus* is the schedule of how and when the course will be presented by the instructor.
- Based on the syllabus, a *lesson plan* is the instructor's personal plan for presenting the course material and activities to students. The *lesson plan* is the creative part of this whole process and you will be hearing more about this in a presentation to follow. It takes the requirements of the syllabus, blends the primary and secondary materials, and creates activities that make the subject matter come alive through planned activities, discussion, student presentations, and very short lectures. The more students are involved during the class period with varied activities, the more interested they will remain.
- A *syllabus* usually lays out the schedule for a complete course of particular study, while the *lesson plan* fleshes out each part of the syllabus so that the teacher can provide instruction and learning activities within the outlined schedule of events in the syllabus. Most instructors have a lesson plan for each class meeting.

You have been provided with a curriculum from which each director of formation, in collaboration with the Council, can create a syllabus or syllabi to best suit a community's particular needs. The biggest advantage of a

syllabus is that, once written, it can be kept indefinitely as the basis for a teacher's lesson plans.

The curriculum you now hold was created with the idea of providing each community with the flexibility to present its requirements in the way best suited to the community's circumstances and needs. This is where the syllabus comes into play.

- Some communities may choose to have a syllabus for each period of formation. For example, a certain community may have a syllabus for the year of Aspirancy, another syllabus for the two years of initial formation, and yet another for the three year program of study before definitive profession.
- There is even more flexibility in the presentation of on-going formation for the fully professed, so a plan for that course of on-going study can be created via a syllabus in accordance with the community's wishes.
- Other communities may choose to lay out their plans for each period of formation with syllabi for every book that is being studied. This type of approach could possibly be used by large communities that have a director of formation and two or three instructors. Conversely, this type may fit a small community's needs just as well.

In any case, a *syllabus* takes the particular course of studies and presents a schedule for its presentation within a set period of time. Because we meet once a month, the schedule can be based on an eleven or twelve month schedule. Certain materials may require a three to six month period, while others could require an entire year.

- For example, if the syllabus is being created for St. John's The Living Flame of Love, based on the amount of time allowed for each class meeting, a schedule for how long it will take to cover the book must be decided. After that has been decided, the schedule of how much will be covered during each class can be determined.
- Because a syllabus, and a lesson plan for that matter, should be student centered and not teacher centered, a syllabus must be created with the candidates in mind; that is, how much the candidates can be reasonably expected to do before class meets (homework) and how

- much they can be reasonably expected to learn within a class period. For that reason, ancillary material, which may increase a candidate's understanding of the material being studied, can be presented in class, rather than as homework assignments. If secondary sources are truly useful and are listed in the curriculum, they can make for very interesting subject matter for a deeper understanding and for discussion within the class period. When they are introduced in this way, secondary materials can help to confirm the candidate's own interpretation of the primary material or bring depth into the understanding. It is always wise to concentrate on the primary material when building a syllabus and when teaching a course. It does not make sense to teach our candidates about our holy father, St. John of the Cross, for example, by using secondary books, while ignoring his own writings.

Because a syllabus should be more than just a schedule, however, the other elements can be added after the determination of the length of study. Taking The Living Flame as our example again, if the first twelve pages are to be studied in one class meeting, expectations of students must be indicated. Will the members in formation -

- be expected to write any notes or express their reactions to the reading,
- will they be expected to have done any kind of homework,
- and what will be the assigned reading or writing for the next meeting?

The format of a syllabus should be -

- easy to read,
- uncomplicated,
- and logical.

Taking the curriculum as the guide, a syllabus should include, after the title of the work –

- the year of formation in which it takes place,
- full information on the work being studied and any other materials which may accompany it,
- and the schedule, with required activities and homework assignments.

- The objective of the study and the expected outcomes for students may also be included. Please note that objectives and outcomes, if stated, should be simple, reasonable, and based on the curriculum.

Initially, creating a syllabus or syllabi takes time, thought, and effort, but it provides a community with an invaluable tool for organizing the entire six year period of formation for its members. Once built, it can be permanent, as long as it meets the needs of those in formation. Of course, there is no need to create all syllabi at once. That is the advantage of our six year program. There is plenty of time to confer on and create one syllabus at a time.