

The Spirituality of Carmelite Leadership (And Group Dynamics among Council Members)

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Introduction

Today, I'm going to talk to you about the spirituality of leadership in our Carmelite Communities and Groups. We sometimes have a tendency to think of our spirituality only in terms of our prayer life, our participation in the Holy Eucharist, and our inter-personal relationships. However, when we are chosen to serve as leaders, we are also assuming some profound spiritual responsibilities that extend well beyond the administrative duties of our positions.

Each of us has a story to tell about how we were drawn to Carmel, and we may have come to Carmel for very different reasons. Some of us were drawn because of a devotion to a particular saint, such as St. Therese of Lisieux. Some were drawn to the writings of St. Teresa of Avila or St. John of the Cross. Others came seeking a deeper prayer life or a closer relationship with God. Still others may have come with a friend, or because a priest recommended that we explore Carmelite spirituality. God has called us to Carmel in a variety of ways, but no matter how we were called, we know our vocation is genuine because it has been confirmed by our leaders under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

However, when we look at our call to Carmel from God's perspective, we gradually come to understand that we were not only called to satisfy our personal goals and aspirations. Rather, God called us so we may grow in union with Him and help others grow in union with Him – for our salvation and for the building up of his kingdom on earth and in the life to come.

This brings me to the first important point that I want us to remember. From this moment forward, we all need to think of our leadership roles in Carmel not simply in terms of administrative responsibilities, but in terms of spiritual responsibilities that have profound implications for ourselves and for the Members of our Communities and Groups. The manner in which we handle our roles as leaders has a tremendous impact on the success or failure of our Communities and Groups. I know each of us here would be devastated to learn that we lost some genuine vocations due to poor leadership on our part. So, in my talk today, I'm going to focus on two main areas that I think can help us be good spiritual leaders:

1. Some of the spiritual principles of good leadership, and
2. Some practical tips for healthy group dynamics among Council Members.

Love, Detachment, and Humility

In Chapter 4, No. 4, of *The Way of Perfection*, St. Teresa laid out the three principles that she thought were the most important for her sons and daughters to demonstrate in Community life. She wrote: *“Do not think, my friends and daughters, that I shall burden you with many things; please God, we shall do what our holy fathers established and observed.... I shall enlarge on only three things, which are from our own constitutions, for it is very important that we understand how much the practice of these three things helps us to possess inwardly and outwardly the peace our Lord recommended so highly to us. The first of these is love for one another; the second is detachment from all created things; the third is true humility, which, even though I speak of it last, is the main practice and embraces all the others.”* (End of quote.)

We’ve all heard these words so many times before, but today I want to talk about how we can practice these virtues as leaders in our Communities and Groups.

Love

Perhaps the most important way we can show love to our Members is to be sensitive to their individual needs and limitations. St. Albert of Jerusalem wrote in Chapter 12 of the Rule: *“Each one is to receive from the Prior – that is from the brother he appoints for the purpose – whatever befits his age and needs.”* [Emphasis added.]

Just think of the love St. Albert demonstrated when he wrote these words! He did not want the original hermits to be subject to an unnecessary conformity that failed to provide for their basic individual needs. Like the original hermits, we are called to fulfill the requirements of our legislation, that is, our Constitutions and Provincial Statutes. However, we are also individuals with unique challenges in our personal lives. Some of us are dealing with aging and health issues in ourselves and in our family Members. Some of us are caregivers. Some of us have financial problems. Some of us have demanding, time-consuming jobs. In our Communities and Groups, our Members differ widely in the demands on their personal time and in their availability for Community and Group projects. As leaders, we need to be aware of these issues and be sensitive to them when we make decisions that affect our Members.

If we truly love our Members, we will do everything we can to protect their vocations. Just as we need to avoid overburdening those who are limited by their personal situations, we also need to avoid overburdening the generous souls who volunteer for everything, even when it isn’t good for them. As leaders, we need to watch for signs of burn-out in our Members. If someone has been very generous in volunteering but suddenly starts failing to fulfill commitments and showing other signs of stress, a good leader will tactfully question the Member in private and take some of the tasks off of his or her shoulders to protect the vocation. This is especially important when it pertains to the apostolate. Provincial Statutes

Sec. II, No. 5, states: “*Apostolic activity keeps in mind a sensitivity to each Community’s interests, abilities, and talents, as well as the physical and financial capabilities of its Members working together.*”

Perhaps the most important way we show love is by forgiving each other when someone hurts, offends, or humiliates us. Like love, forgiveness is an act of will. We must have the will to forgive each other in our Communities and Groups. Why? Because Christ commands it. In Mt 18: 35, Jesus says that the Father will not forgive us unless we forgive each other *from the heart*. This means that our forgiveness must not simply be an outward appearance of forgiveness. We must embrace it in the core of our being. However, even though we may have the will to forgive, we still may struggle with negative emotions such as anger or hurt. In the next talk, Margaret Shore will talk about the generosity of spirit that we all need in order to deal with negative emotions in ourselves and in each other.

Although we must forgive each other’s faults, as leaders we are still required to correct the serious faults that occur among our members. Correction is also an act of love, and we show our love in the manner in which we correct our members when it becomes necessary. In Chapter 15 of the Rule, St. Albert says that faults should be “lovingly corrected.” In other words, we must make all necessary corrections with charity and tact. We could probably spend an entire day pondering and discussing how to make corrections ‘lovingly.’ However, I want to offer just a few suggestions.

- We should make corrections in private if possible, unless the fault impacts the entire Community or may be copied by other Members. This will prevent us from unnecessarily embarrassing and humiliating our Members. For example, if someone repeatedly dominates the discussions in formation classes or Community meetings, it’s a good idea to draw the Member aside at a convenient time to point out the problem and make suggestions for better behavior. Other issues that are best corrected in private include attendance problems and difficulties in completing formation assignments. When we correct these faults in private, we have a better chance of discovering the underlying causes of the problems and lovingly addressing them. If we don’t have time to make a correction privately during our monthly meeting, we can phone the Member at a later date to discuss the matter. This will give us additional time to pray about it before making the correction. Also, if we are angry and upset about the fault, it’s a good idea to wait until we have calmed down before making the correction.
- However, some corrections must be made in front of the other Members, such as when someone makes a statement that contradicts the requirements of the Constitutions, Provincial Statutes, or Church teaching. It’s necessary to correct these errors in front of the others, so no one else retains an erroneous understanding of our vocation and requirements. Here’s an example: Prior to a triannual election, one of

the senior Members announces that only the definitively professed Members will be allowed to vote. However, we know that if the temporarily professed Members are excluded from the voting process, the result will be an invalid election. Hence, this error must be corrected immediately in front of the other Members to prevent future problems for the Community or Group. Here's another example: A Member brings an article from the Internet that says all women should wear the veil at Mass because the requirement was never removed during the Vatican II Council. Another Member agrees, and the rest of Community starts arguing about the issue. In this case, it's necessary for the leader to point out that wearing the veil is *not* required by the Church or by the Order. (In case you are interested, the requirement was not removed during the Vatican II Council, but it was later removed when the Code of Canon Law was revised in 1983.) But what if the President or Group Leader doesn't know the right answer in a dispute? He or she could say something like this: "This topic is not addressed in our Constitutions or Provincial Statutes. During the following month I will research Church teaching and get back to you at our next meeting. In the meantime, we need to move on to other business..."

Another way that we as leaders show love to our Community is knowing when to say "no" to requests from outside parties. Sometimes our Communities and Groups are asked by the parishes to perform tasks that go beyond the scope of our vocation. For example, not long ago my Community was asked to serve as the Altar Guild for the parish where we hold our monthly meetings. This wasn't practical for us, so we found another way to compensate the parish for allowing us to meet on their premises. Another OCDS Community was asked to provide potluck meals for various non-Carmelite parish functions. This was an ongoing burden to the Members. In situations like this, it takes tact and courage to say "no" to these requests; however, it may be necessary in order to protect the vocation of our Members. When it is necessary to say "no," do it gracefully and offer alternative suggestions if possible.

Finally, as leaders, we need to model love in our Communities and Groups by generously serving and giving of our time without complaint and without acting like Early Christian Martyrs because of the time required for the fulfillment of our duties. We need to generously fulfill our responsibilities and participate in our Group and Community Apostolates and projects, so that our Members will be inspired to serve generously as well.

Detachment

Next, I want to talk about the virtue of detachment and how it pertains to our role as leaders in our Communities and Groups. We all have personal preferences. When we are

elected to the Council, it's easy to start thinking about all the ways we want to change the Community or Group. We might even have some very good ideas on how to improve our meetings, formation classes, and apostolates. However, we need to carefully discern whether our ideas for change are truly inspired by the Holy Spirit and whether they will truly benefit our Members. Good ideas for change and improvement are confirmed in prayer. If we have not prayed about the changes we want to make, there is a good chance that we simply want to impose our personal preferences on the other Members. We also need to recognize that other Members may have even better ideas that we haven't thought of. As Council Members, we should devote considerable time to prayer before we make significant changes that affect our Communities and Groups.

We also need detachment when we *implement* changes in our communities. Change is hard for most people. We might have some great ideas that will truly help our Members. However, unless the change is immediately required by the Order, it's a good idea to take some time to prepare our Members for change. Allow time for people to get used to new ideas and projects. If possible, announce difficult changes a few months in advance before implementing them. This will help our Members to accept changes more gracefully.

Another way that we as leaders need to demonstrate detachment is by maintaining our Carmelite charism in our monthly meetings. Most of us have favorite devotions and saints outside of Carmel. However, as Carmelite leaders, we need to resist the temptation to introduce these non-Carmelite topics into our meetings and formation classes. We only have one day a month to be Carmelite together. We need to keep our meetings truly Carmelite. The only way we can prevent other Members from handing out inappropriate material at meetings is to refrain from doing so ourselves. We have the rest of the month to practice our other favorite devotions, if we are so inclined.

It's also important not to allow ourselves to show a personal preference to any of our Members. This is a very important aspect of detachment. Even though we may have personal friends among the Members, during the meetings we need to treat everyone with the same love that we feel towards those with whom we share a special bond. Like St. Therese, we should show a special love for the ones who are the most difficult to love.

If we truly practice the virtue of detachment, we will also have the courage to be temporarily unpopular when circumstances demand it. When we realize our Community or Group is headed in the wrong direction, we must have the courage to take an unpopular stand and speak the truth. Here's an example: Suppose the majority of the Members want to change the monthly meeting time so they can participate in another unrelated activity in the area. However, the change would make it impossible for one of the Members to attend future monthly meetings. In this case, a good leader will stand firm and gently persuade the Council and Community that it would be a failure in love towards one of the Members to make this change.

Humility

Now I want to talk about humility as it pertains to leadership. Remember what Teresa said: Humility is the main practice, and it embraces both love and detachment. We also need to remember what Christ said: The greatest among us must be the servants of all. (Mark 10:42-43)

When we are elected or appointed as Council Members, God is calling us to be the humble servants of the other Members of our Communities and Groups. If we fail to maintain the attitude of a humble servant, our leadership can become a real spiritual danger to us and to the other Members.

The most important thing we need to do is to keep the Promise of Obedience always before our eyes. When we become leaders, our Promise of Obedience becomes even more important than it was before.

How do we practice obedience as leaders? There are several ways, and they are all important:

- We need to fulfill our responsibilities as outlined in the Constitutions and Provincial Statutes. To do this, we must have a good working knowledge of our Constitutions and Provincial Statutes. We cannot expect our Members to be obedient to the decisions of our Councils if we as leaders do not provide good examples of obedience.
- We must not exceed our authority as outlined in the Constitutions and Provincial Statutes. [Repeat this a second time.] Several years ago, at one of our congresses, Fr. Aloysius Deeney gave an example of a leader who exceeded his authority under the Constitutions. In a Community in France, the President required the members to obtain his permission before they could even sell their personal property. This is an extreme example, but it's important to keep it in mind. Before imposing significant requirements on our Members, we need to make sure we actually have the authority to do so under our legislation. The President and Council Members have specific responsibilities with respect to our monthly meetings, the formation of Members, and the handling of elections. However, we may not have the authority to impose other requirements on our Members that are not specifically covered by our legislation.
- We need to gracefully embrace changes in the Constitutions and Provincial Statutes when they are mandated by the Order. We may not always personally agree with the changes that are made to our legislation, but we are required to comply with them because of our Promise of Obedience.

- We need to promptly respond to requests for information that come from the Central Office and the Provincial Council. This is one area that many Presidents and Council Members fail in obedience, and this failure can result in headaches and extra work for those who serve us.
- We often think the great sacrifices in our lives provide us with the greatest opportunities for spiritual growth. However, in truth, it's the little daily sacrifices and acts of obedience that demonstrate to God whether we are truly generous and whether we truly love Him. Remember what Jesus said in Luke 16:10: "The person who is trustworthy in very small matters will also be trustworthy in great ones." We can also be inspired by St. Teresa's words in the Prologue to *The Interior Castle*: "...The strength given by obedience usually lessens the difficulty of things that seem impossible."

Besides obedience, what are some of the other ways we can practice humility as leaders?

- We need to remember that our service as leaders is temporary. The time will come when we will no longer be serving as Presidents or Council Members. If we handle our leadership roles with humility, we will not only still be loved by our Members (as they are required to do), but we may also still be liked by them as human beings.
- We need to be teachable leaders. We need to encourage others to correct us when we make mistakes. We should all have a good working knowledge of the Constitutions and Provincial Statutes. However, at times, we may forget some of the details. If we make a mistake, we should thank the Member who brings it to our attention.
- As much as possible, we need to provide leadership opportunities to the Members who are not serving on the Council. For example, if our monthly meetings include a spiritual conference, allow other Members to occasionally prepare the conference. Other Members can also serve as leaders in our apostolate activities. This will help them develop leadership skills and also help our Members identify other future leaders.

This concludes my comments on how we can practice love, detachment, and humility in our leadership positions. You may also have other good ideas on how we can demonstrate these virtues in our leadership roles. There will be time for comments and questions at the end of my talk.

Before I finish, I want to give you a few practical tips that may help you maintain healthy group dynamics and spirituality among your Council Members.

Group Dynamics and Communications among Council Members

Keep in mind that when a new Council comes together, there may be some stormy sessions as people begin to express their personal opinions and differing ideas. This is normal. Do not be dismayed. A healthy Council is one in which the Members feel free to be open and honest as they express their opinions. It is the President's responsibility to encourage this. However, a good President also needs to know when it's time to end the discussion and make decisions. Here are some ideas that can help the President provide effective leadership to the Council:

- Notify Council Members in advance regarding difficult decisions that need to be made and ask for prayers prior to the Council meeting. When all the Council Members ask the Holy Spirit for guidance in advance, difficult decisions will not be a problem. I can't stress this enough. If we truly ask for guidance from the Holy Spirit, even the most difficult problems will ultimately be resolved with grace for everyone concerned.
- Make sure all Council Members have the opportunity to participate in important discussions. Strong, dominating personalities must refrain from overriding the more timid and shy Members. It is a failure in charity for one Member to dominate every discussion and prevent other Members from providing important input and feedback.
- Just as strong personalities must sometimes restrain themselves from dominating the others, shy and timid Council Members must gather their courage and take the risk of presenting their ideas and opinions in Council discussions. The Holy Spirit speaks through all of us at different times. The voice that is silenced may be the one that actually has the best ideas and solutions.
- It's OK to table a difficult decision for a future meeting if additional information is needed to make an informed decision; however, once all pertinent information has been obtained and the issue has been thoroughly discussed, a decision should be made, even if consensus among the Council Members has not been achieved.
- Make decisions based on facts, not emotions. I can't stress how important this is. Make sure all of the Council Members understand the pertinent facts of an issue before the Council votes on an important decision. The Council may even want to make a list of the pros and cons before voting.
- Council decisions may not be made via phone calls, emails, or text messages. Section XIX, No. 2, of our Provincial Statutes states: "...Individual phone calls, emails, or text exchanges do not constitute a valid meeting of the Council. Teleconferencing or Skype is allowed when distance or weather makes travel difficult." The latter assumes the teleconference includes a valid quorum of Councilors. Section XIX, No. 5a states:

“A quorum for the purposes of a valid action requiring the vote of the Council shall be at least three of the five Council members.” Note also No. 5c: “The President shall cast an additional vote if necessary to break a tie.” And No. 5d: “Voting by phone, letter, email, or proxy shall be invalid.”

- Use Robert’s Rules of Order for important Council decisions. Require a “motion,” a “second,” and a vote by the show of hands. Make sure this process is documented in the Council minutes. This will prevent future disputes over what occurred during the voting process and the final decision.
- Once the Council has voted, the dissenting Council Members are subject to the Council’s decision under the Promise of Obedience. [Repeat this with emphasis.] The Council is the local authority for the Community or Group, and the dissenting Council members are subject under obedience to the decisions of the majority.
- Avoid factions within the Council. All Council Members are responsible for refraining from behind the scenes gossiping and politicking with other Council Members. A failure in charity among Council Members will always have a negative effect on the entire Community or Group. Remember the words of St. John of the Cross in No. 60 of the *Sayings of Light and Love*: “When evening comes, you will be examined in love. Learn to love as God desires to be loved and abandon your own ways of acting.” We must never forget that this applies to the way we treat each other when we are called to serve as leaders in our Communities and Groups.

In Conclusion: Pray, pray, pray!

- We need to bring all of our leadership concerns to God in prayer.
- We need to trust that He will always be with us, even in small matters and decisions.
- Every difficult situation that arises in the Council, Community, or Group can be brought to a satisfactory conclusion if we take it to God in prayer.