

## **“Motivating Better Attendance”**

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Opening Prayer: Lord Jesus Christ, You raised up St. Teresa of Avila to be a guide in the ways of prayer and contemplation. Give us the grace to follow her example with fidelity and generosity. Lead us into the wine cellar of Your love where, refreshed by Your Spirit, we, too, may sing of Your mercies and be set aflame with the fire of Your love. Amen.

What motivates us as human beings?

- ~ to do something that is fulfilling
- ~ if we feel connected
- ~ if we have responsibilities
- ~ a desire to help others, to give back some of what we have received
- ~ a desire to help ourselves (grow in holiness)
- ~discontentment can also be a motivating factor to not accept the status quo but to try to improve, even if that means going from good to better.

I find this quote from St Teresa’s *Book of Foundation* motivating, “If we who live now had not fallen from where our forebears were, and those who come after us would live as they did the edifice would always be firm. What does it profit me that our forebears had been so holy if afterward I am so wretched that I leave the edifice damaged through bad customs?” [Chapter 4 #6]

What motivates us as Christians and Carmelites?

~a desire to grow in our prayer life and to truly love God

St. Teresa says in *The Interior Castle*:

“The essence of prayer is love, and love consists, not in the extent of our own happiness, but in the firmness of our determination to please God in everything and to endeavor to avoid all that could offend Him. It consists too in a desire to advance the honor and glory of Jesus Christ, and the growth of the Catholic Church. These are the signs of true love.” [Fourth Dwelling Places, Chapter 1 #7]

This seems to be what motivates those who are martyred for the faith.

A recent Christian martyr in Ecuador, Jim Elliot ,(1927-1956) said

"He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose."

It was said of one of the early Christian martyrs, St. Ignatius of Antioch, “By dying he will follow his Master. Like his Master, the martyr's way of the cross begins with the mystery of Gethsemane, beseeching God for help, but also seeking support from others, friends and companions in faith." St Ignatius said, “may nothing seen or unseen fascinate me, so that I may happily make my way to Jesus Christ!” (To the Romans 5-6)

We all want to be good followers of Jesus, to “live a life of allegiance to Jesus Christ...unswerving in the service of the Master”(as is stated in paragraph 2 of the Rule of St Albert). In doing so we may keep our eyes on Jesus and happily make our way to him!

It goes without saying to do this we constantly pray to God for help, but we also need to seek support from one another, especially our community members, those who are our companions in faith.

Let me ask three more fundamental questions?

Who are we?

What are we trying to accomplish?

Why?

Let's turn to our Legislative Documents, starting with the Rule of St Albert to see what it has to say about Who we are, as leaders in our communities and groups?

[para. 4] The first thing I require is for you to have a Prior, one of yourselves, who is to be chosen for the office by common consent

What are we trying to accomplish?

[para. 22] You and whoever may succeed you as Prior, must always keep in mind and put into practice what our Lord said in the Gospel: Whoever has a mind to become a leader among you must make yourself servant to the rest.

Who are we according to our Constitutions?

# 46. The Council, composed of the President and three Councilors and the Director of Formation, constitutes the immediate authority of the community.

~then it continues to answer What are we trying to accomplish?

The primary responsibility of the Council is the formation and Christian and Carmelite maturing of the members of the community.

Constitution 32 clarifies What we are trying to accomplish by our formation stating, "the purpose of formation is "to prepare the person to live the spirituality of Carmel".

Constitution 34 further explains that "both initial and ongoing formation in the teachings of Teresa and John of the Cross, help to develop in the Carmelite Secular a human, Christian and spiritual maturity for service to the Church."

This is the purpose of the existence of communities of the Secular Order and we must understand our own identity and the responsibilities that come with it.

As Fr. Deeney said in his talk at the Las Vegas Congress in 2004, "We are not a collective group of individuals who love our Lady and love Carmelite spirituality. We are a community of people who have made a commitment to each other. It is very clear, when we make our promise; we make it to the Community." We are incorporating ourselves as members of a community, a province and the world-wide Order.

Our Constitution 6e – reminds us that one of the principles of Carmelite life is "Being concerned for the needs and the good of others in the community".

In our Statutes Section XIII paragraph #4 states:

“Because Community life is central to the Teresian Carmelite charism, attendance at the monthly meetings is **required**. Lack of regular attendance without excuse or notification is a negative indication of a vocation.”

Our vocation is to love God and to love one another. This love is to build community. To build community we need to be strict on attendance. Attendance enables the building of community so that members can know one another and grow in our love for each other through the joys and challenges we share.

In Fr. Deeney’s article on *How the Council Ought to Function*, there is a section called Fellowship. It speaks of how important it is for us to spend time together, to waste time together, to relax and enjoy one another’s company.

Recreation as you know is an important part of Carmelite lifestyle according to our Holy Mother, St Teresa. When we are together we learn from and about each other and are able to support one another, to grow, to love and care for each individual member even in the diversity of our needs and our gifts.

Through our Constitutions and our Provincial Statutes, it is made very clear the importance of community. We need to do everything we can to nourish and develop close relationships with one another, in order to grow in our love and “create authentic community in the world”, as is stated in Constitution 13. It also states, “The promise of chastity reinforces the commitment to love God above all else, and to love others with the love God has for them.”

In order for our communities to mature in our Christian and Carmelite vocation, we must, as council members, be a witness to the community, and the community, in turn will be a witness to the world - “see how they love one another”. This is part of our apostolate, to be this kind of example to the world.

The following was written by a Secular Order member, Gerald Alford, from the Oklahoma Province:

“The goal of our formation is to discern and prepare us for our Definitive Promise, and then to enhance and sustain our living out that commitment for the rest of our lives. It is the Promise that makes us Carmelites, members of the Order and of the community to which we belong. Therefore, it is helpful to reflect upon the ... Evangelical counsels to which we commit ourselves by our Promise.

By attending the meetings of our community we experience what it means to live with others in a relationship of chaste love and strive to extend this experience to all our relationships. Our faithful attendance requires the spirit of poverty whereby we learn to lay down our lives for our friends by being present to and with them in community, which sometimes means sacrificing our desire to be somewhere else or do something else that seems more pleasurable to the senses. Our regular attendance too is a demonstration of our spirit of obedience since our Constitutions and Provincial Statutes call us to regular attendance.”

We are accountable to each other. We make our Promise, “to the Superiors of the Order of the Teresian Carmel and to you, my brothers and sisters”. This means we need to take care of each other. We should have the understanding that our vocation is more about giving than receiving. We can all easily name the many gifts we receive from being a Secular Carmelite, but the real question is, do we recognize God has called us to this life so we can give?

It is also our duty to do whatever we can to encourage one other to fully live our vocation, bringing out the best in each member which in turn helps us all develop the gifts God has given us individually and as a community.

One of the practical steps we can take is for your community to have an attendance policy. Do you? Our Provincial Council will be considering this before the next elections in our Province in 2014.

Statutes Sec. XVIII: Procedure for Electing the Council, 2 b) says, “To be eligible to vote a member must be professed, on the community roster, and in compliance with the Community attendance policy regarding voter eligibility.”

You must have an attendance policy for your members to be in compliance with it. I will share an example with you, but please keep in mind, this is just one example and there can be variations on it depending on differences from one community or group to the next.

Attendance at all meetings, retreats and community days of recollection is required. If you are ill, have unavoidable family obligations, or any extraordinary circumstance that prevents you from attending, these will be excused as long as you contact the President or your Formation leader. If there are three absences within a twelve month period, the council will need to review your situation and meet with you to decide how to proceed. It will determine whether or not you remain on the active status of the roster. (*In a little bit I will explain the various categories of membership such as active status*). Keep in mind there is the possibility of a Leave of Absence if needed and extensions for those in formation. (See Statutes Sec X)

In the folder provided are a couple of articles I am referring to at this time. The Leave of Absence and Definition of Membership. These articles can also be found on our website under the category *Helps & Tips*.

#### Leave of Absence

The term “leave of absence” means that an active member, who has made at least the First Promise and who has become unable to attend meetings regularly, may receive permission from her/his Council not to attend meetings for a year or less. However, she/he must maintain contact with the community by personal contact, phone, email, letter etc.

Re-integration of definitively professed members returning from a leave of absence would require about a year of formation.

The community’s Council will need someone in charge of re-formation of these members.”

A member not definitively professed would resume formation at the stage when she/he took the leave of absence. If the leave was in the middle of a formation year, she/he would begin the formation year again.

The next article is: Definition of Membership

You can see there are four categories:

ACTIVE members, who actively attend meetings

- this includes professed members – 1<sup>st</sup> Promise and Definitive.

INFIRM members who due to illness are unable to attend meetings.

They continue to keep in contact with the community in some way.

EXTENDED members who have a valid reason, approved by their Community Council, for not attending meetings regularly.

They also keep in contact with the community in some way.

- Infirm and Extended members are generally those who have made their Definitive Promise. Someone who has made their 1<sup>st</sup> promise would not be placed in these categories, but might need a Leave of Absence.

The fourth category is: INACTIVE members who are those who have made promises, but are not participating in meetings and have no valid reason for this lack of community participation.

When a person is put on inactive status, the member's name is removed from the active roster and placed on the inactive roster. A person who is officially inactive is not eligible to vote or participate in the business meeting of the community. The community is no longer required to remain in contact with him/her.

- Inactive members would usually be those who have made their Definitive Promise, although it may be someone who has made their Temporary Promise in which case when their three years has expired, they are dropped completely from the roster.

Regarding Inactive members, the article says, "The procedures in our *Provincial Statutes*, Section XIII, #6 should be followed. The Provincial Delegate must always be consulted."

It is extremely important that you pay attention to that sentence, "the Provincial Delegate must always be consulted". He will be able to guide you properly especially since that Statute will be undergoing some changes.

Last September the Provincial Council submitted some revisions to our *Provincial Statutes*.

Are you all well aware that this took place?

The first change was to sections XVIII and XIX regarding Election Procedures and the Nominating Committee. That was done September 2010. Then additional changes were made July 2011.

A letter was sent to each president and group leader about these changes. It is also in the July 2011 Newsletter which is posted on the website.

As we are growing in our understanding through the practical application of our Statutes, changes are inevitable. One revision is in Section XIII #6 (that we have been talking about regarding Inactive Members). It previously said “procedures will be initiated to dismiss him/her from the Order,” and was changed to “dismissed from the Community”.

During this triennium the Provincial council is in the process of writing two new Statutes to address the change still needed in this Statute. The first addresses matters of attendance at community meetings and how to deal with those people who are repeatedly absent. The second will propose guidelines to help councils with conflict resolution.

Absenteeism states how a person eliminates themselves, (they abandon the community on their own accord).

Conflict resolution will help us follow the principle the gospel teaches, which is that God wishes repentance and reconciliation.

Here are some scriptural references we can meditate on to encourage forgiveness and to help us embrace the possibilities of rebuilding relationships.

1 Timothy 2: 4 - God our savior, wills everyone to be saved and to come to knowledge of the truth.

There is no circumstance or situation that we can just write someone off. We can't afford to fall into the trap that is prevalent in our society, which is the abortion mentality – if someone is a nuisance or a burden to you, just get rid of them.

Another scripture is 2 Peter 3:9 – “God is patient with you, not wishing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance.”

Remember, sometimes people or situations that seem to be the biggest trials for us also turn out to be the greatest blessings, (if we patiently endure with hope)!

The point is not to pursue what the limits to dismissal are, but creatively discover what the solution might be to handling difficult people and situations.

The route to take is to work together to resolve the situation. That's why conflict resolution is so important. There is the possibility for someone placed on the inactive list to return and be re-integrated into the community, under the guidance of the Provincial Delegate.

Those who go through the steps of a leave of absence show they care enough to communicate, where absenteeism shows a lack of caring and a lack of communication.

Formation and good communication must be done well so dismissals are a last resort.

Let's not be like those St. John of the Cross referred to in the Prologue to the Ascent of Mount Carmel, who "like the builders of the tower of Babel" (Gen 11:1-9), who when they "were supposed to provide the proper materials for the project, they brought entirely different supplies, because they failed to understand the language. And thus nothing was accomplished."

Let us take care that our communication does not cause confusion so that we end up scattered rather than united.

Let us instead be like the early church where on the day of Pentecost, they were all together in one place and began giving praise to God as the Spirit enabled them to do. Let us be open to speak God's language, words of love, rather than the words that come to our lips from our own natural inclinations.

Each phase of our journey has its benefits and challenges.

If we truly want to follow Jesus on our journey we must first orient ourselves, get our bearings straight and recognize that Jesus is our true north. The journey requires continual reorienting ourselves to Him, and our purpose is not what makes us happy, but what brings God honor and glory, (which also brings us more joy than we can imagine). He said that he came to serve, not to be served, so what should we do? Do we need to travel great distances or make huge plans? No, we simply are attentive in our everyday lives to the people in it, especially those closest to us, our family, our brothers and sisters in Carmel, and anyone else God has placed in our lives.

A few weeks ago the Gospel reading was from Matthew, where Jesus, tells us how things will go at the end of time, when he comes in his glory and sits upon the judgment throne.

I have heard this gospel reading all my life, which I have always found quite motivating. I do not want to be placed on his left with the goats. To avoid being a goat we must do what the catechism has always taught, "what must we do to gain the happiness of heaven? We must know, love, and serve God."

Sometimes at the end of mass we hear, "go in peace to love and serve the Lord". How do we do that according to the Gospel of Matthew? It deals with our human relationships, giving food and drink to those hungry and thirsty, caring for those in need, and whatever we do for our brothers and sisters, because Jesus says, we do it for him.

What can we, who are active members do to be attentive to those infirm members who are unable to attend meetings? Are we fulfilling our responsibilities to them? There are many who are aging and they need visits and support from the other members.

Remember, there is a difference between those who approach the community as aspirants and have disabilities that do not allow them to fulfill the necessary requirements, and those who are members who as they age they become disabled. God provides all that is needed with a true vocation. With an aging person their vocation isn't lost but it is a call to the rest of the community to respond to this person and their needs.

We need to be mindful of the gifts that our senior members bring to us. They through their experiences and through their fine examples help form us and remind us to help us stay on the right path.

Fr. Deeney has said, "Meetings are indispensable for keeping ourselves on the right track in regards to what it means to be a Carmelite. The longer you do not attend meetings, the more difficult it is for you to stay in the middle course."

We must heed this advice personally and take responsibility to help our brothers and sisters who cannot do it for themselves.

On the other side of the coin, there are those people who feel they have "graduated" and no longer need to attend.

We must keep emphasizing to those members the importance of docility, teachability, and growth at every stage of the spiritual life. The Pharisees thought they knew it all and did not need to change. We all need to avoid that way of thinking.

We are here because of those who came before us – so we are grateful to them and to show our love and respect to them we need to figure out loving ways to support them as we continue on our journey together which includes growth through changes. This will require an abundance of charity. Those in leadership must be the most tolerant and continue to communicate to the best of their ability.

Some of our long-time members may say it's not what they originally signed up for, but they need to embrace the fact that the church is asking something new from us as Carmelites, therefore, we stretch and grow and respond accordingly.

The sad truth is that many times people don't make progress because they are afraid of change, or are against it.

In the prologue of the Ascent of Mt Carmel, St John says, "although it is true that God is leading them, and that He can lead them without their own help, they will not allow themselves to be led; and thus they make less progress, because they resist Him ...like children who, when their mothers desire to carry them in their arms, start stamping and crying, and insist upon being allowed to walk, with the result that they can make no progress; and, if they advance at all, it is only at the pace of a child."

Here are some more thoughts from Gerald Alford (that seem to me to be a response from a long-time member, who gets it. He understands what is being asked of him).

He says, "What counts is faithfulness to my commitment, my intention, and the consistency of my choice. I may find attendance at meetings, for example, generally a burden temperamentally and, perhaps, more often than not, irrelevant to my needs. Even so, I choose to attend meetings regularly as a concrete expression of my obedience, as a sign of my faithfulness to my commitment, as a defense against a possible form of subtle pride which insinuates that I am above others, as a practice of charity sustained by the hope that my presence which may seem useless to me may be in fact a valuable witness to others. ...In attending meetings, I strive to be attentive to what is going on, to be active in my participation in discussions, and to be responsive to communal needs presented by volunteering to serve."

All of us have consented to serve God in our groups and communities in leadership along the "Royal Road" as Our Holy Mother St Teresa calls this way we are traveling together. This life of prayer by which we grow in God's friendship requires three conditions, love of neighbor, detachment from the things of the world, especially oneself, and humility, defined as walking in the truth.

We are able to do this only through God's grace and we receive strength by meditating on the Word of the Lord, day and night. (Rule of St Albert #10)

We can be greatly motivated by such scriptures as: Jeremiah 29:11-13, "For I know well the plans I have in mind for you, plans for your welfare and not for woe, so as to give you a future of hope. When you call me, and come and pray to me, I will listen to you. When you look for me, you will find me.

As leaders it is our duty to listen attentively and do what we can to be helpful guides to others on this journey.

Isaiah 40:3 instructs us to...prepare the way of the Lord! Make straight in the wasteland a highway for our God!

John the Baptist said (John 1:23)... "I am the voice of one crying out in the desert, 'make straight the way of the Lord'"

Psalms 143: 10...Let your good spirit guide me in ways that are level and smooth.

Our words and actions must help shine his light to direct, advise, warn of pending dangers, redirect by way of detours when necessary.

St. Paul says in Romans 14:13 "Let us resolve never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of one another."

~and in I Corinthians 8:9, "Make sure this liberty of yours in no way becomes a stumbling block to the weak."

Rather than stumbling blocks, let's be stepping stones, or building blocks to help build up God's kingdom here on earth.

Our faithfulness to our commitment is important. We must carry on with Teresian determination and continuous prayer.

At the end of our journey, may we be blessed to hear Jesus say, “Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.” (Mt 25:34)

So let us pray:

(from Intercessions from the third Tuesday of Advent)

Prepare a path in our hearts for the coming of your Word, and let his glory be revealed among us.  
Bring low the mountains of our pride, and fill up the valleys of our weakness.  
Break down the walls of hatred that divide the nations, and make level for mankind the paths to peace.

Amen