

THE IDEAL COUNCIL

Lucy Okoh, OCDS

We have become Carmelites in the spirit of Elijah. We join with him in saying ‘with zeal have I been zealous for the Lord God of Hosts’ (1 Kings 19:10). Following in the footsteps of Elijah are St Teresa of Jesus and St John of the Cross. We see through the eyes of St Teresa of Jesus and St John of the Cross our path to holiness. By adhering to our Promise of Poverty, Chastity and Obedience, we are able to resist evil and become perfect by putting on the armor of God. From Ephesians St Albert included in our Rule the armor as the breastplate of justice, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit. (Ephesians 6:13-17).

As leaders of our communities and groups we are called to model that Promise. The Promise of Poverty demands that we be detached from our personal opinions and desires in seeking the good of the Carmelite members as outlined in the Constitutions and Statutes and Formation Guidelines. The Promise of Chastity guides us in the purity of our intentions. We are focused on giving honor and glory to God, not seeking our own praise and satisfaction in self-interest. The Promise of Obedience to the Order fulfills our desire to do the will of God as set out in our Constitutions and Statutes.

The difference between Communities, Recognized Groups, and Study Groups is outlined in the Constitutions and Statutes.

Communities elect their President and the three Council members. The Formation Director, Treasurer, and Community Secretary are appointed by the Council. The Spiritual Assistant is appointed by the Provincial Delegate. The governing body for Communities is the Council. Const. paragraph 50

Recognized Groups have their Spiritual Assistant, Group Leader and Formation Director appointed by the Provincial Delegate. The Recognized Group is under the direct supervision of the Provincial Delegate.

Study Groups are under the direct supervision of the Provincial Delegate. Statutes Sec. XXI #1-6.

The difference between Communities and Recognized Groups and Study Groups is well defined.

Communities are canonically established, elect their officers, and have a council of five members who are the governing body for the community.

Recognized Groups and Study Groups have their officers appointed by the Provincial Delegate and are under the direct supervision of the Provincial Delegate.

If you are a Community, decisions are made in the five member council. If you are a Recognized Group or Study Group, decisions are discussed among the appointed officers and verified by the Provincial Delegate.

In the introduction I have just stated that Carmelites hold as their goal to achieve holiness by following the Promise. In examining a discussion that might take place between the President (P) and a Council Member (CM) within the elected appointed body we will look at the interaction between them and how they achieve their goal.

Scene: On stage one Council Member (CM) and the President (P)

P: Glad to hear that your Dad has really improved since his surgery.

CM: Thank you. The family is grateful for the community's prayers. I appreciate the support that the community gave my family.

P: At the last few meetings the members seem to be disinterested during the meeting. A few left early without mentioning it to anyone.

CM: Maybe they had better things to do.

P: That's why I thought we could *spice up* the meeting with an outside speaker. So I've invited a Divine Mercy speaker for the next OCDS meeting. He will do a presentation and discussion on Divine Mercy Devotion that will take several hours of our meeting.

CM: Shouldn't the council discuss this first before inviting anyone?

P: The speaker is a good friend of mine who wants to spread the Divine Mercy Devotion.

CM: So does that mean we won't have Formation next meeting?

P: Divine Mercy Devotion is more important than our Formation. I know what's best for our members. And who are you to tell me what to do.

Provincial Council member summarizes and reflects on Constitutions, Formation Guidelines, and Statutes where appropriate as to the solution and further action.

***Well, from the two opening lines we hear the President expressing her concern for the council member's father. The Council Member is very grateful for the community's prayers and support for her father and her family.**

This tells us that within the community/group there is fraternal charity among the brothers and sisters in Carmel. There is a real concern among the members for the well being of the members. And they actively participate in showing fraternal charity.

The community/group is following the Formation Guidelines directive as found on page 2 of '*Climbing the Mount in Response to God's Call to Carmel*'. "Our life in Carmel . . . is the function of a community's structured formation program to shape our response to God's call to reach the summit. We are formed into community for aid and support on our ascent... In the experience of community life we find the movement and guidance of the Holy Spirit, and a most effective way to grow in virtue..."

So in other words, our formation in Carmel is the building of the community spirit among members for aid and support in our journey in Carmel.

The Constitutions state in paragraph 24a: "...the local community of the Secular Order ...is a place to live and promote personal and communal fellowship with God in Christ and in the Spirit and with other brothers and sisters in accordance with the Teresian charism..." and in paragraph 24b: "Relations are marked by the virtues of a love that is genuine, gratuitous, free and unselfish, as well as by detachment and humility."

So the Formation Program is forming us in the Promise. We know that the members are being formed by the way members care and support each other.

***Let's look at the next two lines from the skit. These lines suggest that the members might be leaving early because the meeting and formation is not holding their interest. It also shows that the members do not have a strong commitment to the Promise of Obedience to the Order.**

Taken from the Formation Guidelines '*Specifics for All Stages of Formation*', "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 to integrate the Rule, the *OCDS Constitutions*, and our promise into our daily lives." Everyone should have a copy of the formation program so that they are provided the means "...for the possibility of mutual empowerment and accountability in its implementation."

A suggestion to remedy *what is not holding their interest* would be to examine the agenda for a meeting. Does the agenda reflect what Teresa had envisioned as community life? Has time been set aside for quiet prayer, scripture study through *lectio divina*, spiritual direction, Liturgy of the Hours, social time together, Carmelite formation and business meeting when needed? Remember this meeting time is 'tailored to the needs of each community'. So flexibility is needed.

Since members are failing to mention to the President or their Formator that they are leaving the meeting, then a reminder might be needed to encourage the members of their commitment to the community which is similar to their commitment to a family. The President or Formator could call them to show their concern for them. Most likely members are leaving because of a personal issue. By showing fraternal charity the President or the Formator will be demonstrating their sincere concern for each member in the family of Carmel.

***In the next two lines the President reveals that she has invited a Divine Mercy speaker without consulting the council. The council member reminds the President that decisions should be made by the governing body which is the council.**

The remarks by the council member suggests to me that the council is familiar with Constitutions paragraph 46 that states: The Council, composed of the President and three Councilors and the Director of Formation, constitutes the immediate authority of the community. The primary responsibility of the council is the formation and Christian and Carmelite maturing of the members of the community.”

I’m sure the President meant well by substituting a different devotion other than Carmelite spirituality hoping it might ‘spice things up’. But the members joined the OCDS because they are really attracted to Carmelite Spirituality. So the council with the President should examine their Formation Program and see what is lacking and what needs to be reinforced.

Taken from the Formation Guidelines ‘*Specifics for All Stages of Formation*’, “***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.”

In their council meeting the council members could discuss the goals of the Formation Program, the focus of Carmel, and brain storm solutions that would *spice up* the meeting. If they are not able to do this in a council meeting then they should meet with the President outside of the meeting. The whole point is to stress that the council is the governing body where decisions are made for the whole community, where discussion is done in a respectful manner involving all council members.

***In the next line the President says that the speaker is her good friend who is on a mission to spread the Divine Mercy Devotion.**

Could the President's intention of inviting this particular speaker be to reinforce her friendship with her friend rather than reinforce Carmelite Spirituality? Could the President be divided in her commitment to her friend and to the community?

We take a Promise of Chastity which is purity of intention. As President of the community her priority is to the needs of the Carmelite community. The Carmelite seeks to grow in holiness through the example of Teresa and John of the Cross. The Carmelite meeting is the best place the Carmelite could gain this knowledge and the means of imitating our saints. (*Constitutions paragraph 13*)

Could the President be more attached to the friend's desire than that which is required by our Constitutions?

We are called by the Promise of Poverty to a greater "generosity, self-denial, and the interior liberty ... to be at the service of [Christ's] brothers and sisters." (*Constitutions paragraph 14*)

If the community is to grow in the spirit of poverty, chastity, and obedience then the President should be at the service of the community in guiding and leading the community to this fulfillment. So the President should be focused on Carmel.

In the Promise of Obedience we have pledged 'to live open to the will of God ... [and that will is expressed in] those who have responsibility for guiding the

community and the Order in discerning and accepting God's ways. Those who have that responsibility are the community's council, the Provincial and the General.' (*Constitutions #15*)

In summing up, what is the focus of Carmel for the President, the council and the community: it is to genuinely follow the Formation Guidelines, the Constitutions, and the Statutes so as to foster the embodiment of Carmelite Spirituality.

***In the next line the council member replies to the President's intention of substituting a two hour presentation for their Formation meeting.**

This reply indicates to me that the members do have a desire for Formation. The Carmelite brothers and sisters do want to grow in their knowledge and understanding of their path to holiness. They are seeking that their time is well spent on formation. They seem dismayed that they will not participate in formation.

There are many suggestions for the development of Carmelite spirituality in the Formation Guidelines. It is suggested that the whole community is to be involved in some type of review of the *OCDS Constitutions and Provincial Statutes*, Scripture study through *lectio divina*, and some information on Saints of the Order.

And in the *Provincial Statutes XIII* the following additions are suggested: a conference by the Spiritual Assistant, the Liturgy of the Hours, devotion to Mary, formation, and time for socializing and a business meeting if necessary.

***In the concluding line from the President she states that the Divine Mercy Devotion is more important than our Formation. She knows what's best for the members. And she concludes with "who are you to tell me what to do."**

Wow! It seems like the President thinks that she knows what is best and is in command.

Just a quick review: The council is the governing body of the community. “The primary responsibility of the council is the formation and Christian and Carmelite maturing of the members of the community.” (*Constitutions paragraph 46*) The primary responsibility of the council is to focus on Carmel.

There is a new section in the Statutes that addresses ‘Conflict Resolution’ (*Statutes Section XIV*). Although the President seems to have taken control, it may be because she has the sincere belief she is doing what is best for the community. So a respectful discussion involving the President and the council members with ‘great kindness and patience’ should be enough to resolve any misunderstandings of the Constitutions and Statutes without any scandal.

The following is taken from the *Statutes Section XIV: Conflict Resolution* #1, a, b. All O.C.D.S. members by their vocation must demonstrate fraternal charity in the spirit of the Gospel (Mt 18:15-20), both in care and service to all the members of the group or community; fostering a spirit of Christian and Carmelite affability, being careful to avoid any undue preference for some members over others, and providing support and guidance with great kindness and patience (2 Tim 4:2), especially to any member suffering personal difficulties.

a) Although, it is normal that disagreements and conflicts may arise, it is encouraged that they be expressed with the fruits of the Spirit, “*love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.*” (Gal 5:22-23)

b) Community life and interaction is under the authority of the local Council. It is the duty of the Council to swiftly identify and resolve any issues that may potentially disrupt or negatively affect the community. Any member who recognizes such an issue is encouraged to discretely bring it to the Council’s attention so that the council may facilitate a resolution.

As you have noticed ‘It is the duty of the Council to swiftly identify and resolve any issues that may potentially disrupt or negatively affect the community’. Sometimes we think if we ignore the elephant in the room it will go away. Many times the elephant doesn’t go away, but festers. That is why it is best to address the issue with fraternal charity remembering that we could all go astray as well.

We must remember to be grateful that our brothers and sisters have brought us back to the community in all love and understanding.

In the last discussion we covered the importance of the council coordinating all the decisions for the community/group.

In the following discussion we will examine the interaction between the Formation Director and a Council Member.

Scene: On stage one council member (CM) and the Formation Director (FD)

CM: I want to congratulate you on your appointment as the community's Formation Director. You have a lot to offer our community of 12 members. We all are looking forward to your service to the community.

FD: Thank you. I have already started to plan a new approach to the Formation Program. With only 6 Definitive members, they are overworked in their duties as Formators. To solve this we will start a general formation. All members from Aspirants to OnGoing will study St. John of the Cross' *Dark Night*. Everyone will be required to have read the whole book by next month. And during next month's Formation everyone must be able to give a book report to the whole Formation Group.

FD: (casually continues) Personally, I can't stand the writings of St. John of the Cross, but we're required to do this, so let's grit our teeth and do it! Let's get it over with as soon as possible! Who knows? Someone here might like him!

CM: (looks shocked) Shouldn't the council discuss this new program before it is implemented?

FD: And Sue who just moved to *Smalltown* last month would be an excellent Formator for this new Program. She said she had taught *Dark Night* in her previous group.

CD: Sue seems like a nice person. She has only been to one meeting. Shouldn't we discuss this with the council?

FD: You know with the election coming up a few members wanted to bring in flyers and do a presentation on global climate change. I think that global climate change is an issue we should address.

CM: Global climate change may be an interesting topic. Shouldn't we be focused on Carmelite topics? Still shouldn't this be discussed in the council first before introducing it?

Provincial Council member summarizes and reflects on Constitutions, Formation Guidelines, and Statutes where appropriate as to the solution and further action.

***In the first few lines the council member congratulates the Formation Director.**

The council member is excited to have the new, experienced Formation Director 'who will be of service to the community'.

***Then the Formation Director responds by revealing her plan for a new Formation Program for the next meeting.**

The Formation Director is starting a Formation Program for all the 12 members, 6 of which are Definitely Professed. This fast forward approach to the study of *Dark Night* has never been discussed with the council.

As we mentioned in the last discussion, the council is the governing body and is to have input on the Formation Program. And from the Constitutions paragraph 46 '... the primary responsibility of the council is the formation and Christian and Carmelite maturing of the members of the community.'

Why do you think that the council should have input in the selection of a new Formation Program?

The Community's formation is focused on Human Formation, Christian Formation, Carmelite Formation, and of course Formation in the Apostolate.

Human Formation forms members in fraternal charity, giving service to the community and being teachable. Christian Formation is internalizing the Gospel. Carmelite Formation is beginning 'to understand and live the Carmelite Rule of St. Albert as interpreted by our Constitutions.' For the benefit of the members, the council must be careful in what is included in this program. For this reason the Province has developed the Formation Guidelines. Within the community and group there is flexibility in adapting the Guidelines to suit the makeup of the members. That is where the council comes in as the experienced experts acting as an advisory group in that process.

***Let's examine the program that the Formation Director is introducing as a substitute for the recommended Formation Program. All 12 members are to read *The Dark Night* and write a book report. She wants everyone to present the book report to the whole Formation Group at the next meeting. She expresses her dislike for John of Cross hoping to get his writings out of the way as soon as possible.**

What actually is the suggested Formation Program for our Province?

The Formation Guidelines have set out 7 levels of Formation: We have the **Aspirants**, **Formation I**, which includes the study of Teresa's *Way of Perfection* and a biography of John of the Cross and his *The Living Flame of Love*, **Formation II**, which includes the study of Therese's *Story of the Soul*, Teresa's *Interior Castle*, John of the Cross's *Ascent of Mt Carmel*, and **On Going Formation** which is a further study of the Carmelite writings.

As the Constitutions paragraph 18 clearly states that to nourish the prayer life of Secular Carmelites our highest priority is the study and spiritual reading of scripture and the writing of our Saints, particularly those who are Doctors of the Church: St. Teresa, St. John of the Cross, and St. Therese of the Child Jesus.

Formators' best teaching practices suggest that the candidates need to digest the information and discuss it. There should be a gradual learning of the Carmelite

teachings. Candidates are also in Formation to develop as Carmelites. So we are not just there for knowledge.

What could be an alternative solution by the Council for this fast forward approach to *Dark Night*?

Here's one solution: *The Dark Night* could still be covered. During the general meeting the community/group could have a guided year-long study for 30 minutes at each meeting. Probably a slow process over a period of time would be a better way to absorb John of the Cross.

And then during the regular formation class the community/group could still follow the suggested levels of formation. There are 6 Definitive members who are available as Formators. Since the suggested books for study now have Study Guides, teaching becomes a little easier for planning.

The 6 candidates need to be placed in their appropriate level of Formation. The Formation Director will have to see what they have covered and what they still need to cover. If it is said that, "I only have one candidate to teach, that it is a waste of my time to teach only one candidate." Whether there is one or more in a level doesn't really matter, since the purpose of formation is to form each candidate for their Definitive Profession. There needs to be a stable, progressive development of each candidate in their Carmelite Spirituality.

There are other possible solutions as well, but it is for the council to decide the best formation for the community/group.

***In the next few lines the Formation Director then suggests that a new prospective transferring Secular Carmelite could handle the Formation Program since she has taught *Dark Night* previously.**

She is described as a 'nice person', excellent Formator', attended one meeting, and has experience teaching *Dark Night*.

What do the Statutes say about transfers from another community?

Statutes Section XXIV #1 states that 'A member regularly belongs to the community/group in which she makes the promise, until an official transfer is effected...'

And #3 states that ‘When relocated, a member should contact the nearest community/recognized group and ask to attend for **at least a year** to allow the receiving community and the member to decide if they wish to finalize an official transfer.’

So the Statutes say that the Secular Carmelite transferring and the receiving community/group are to discern for a year whether to finalize the transfer. While in the year of discernment, she is still a member of her previous community/group.

Here are some questions that come to mind:

What if she decides not to transfer to our community/group?

What if our members are not comfortable with her teaching?

Shouldn't we wait at least a year to evaluate how she fits in?

Is the reason the Formation Director giving this assignment to her, because our ‘6 Definitive members...are overworked in their duties as Formators’?

Again the council has to determine if this Formator would be a good choice.

***In the last two lines the Formation Director wants to put flyers out on a non Carmelite topic ‘global climate change. The council member thinks it is an interesting topic, but that we should be focused on Carmelite topics and should discuss this in the council meeting.**

In a community/group the Formation Guidelines stipulate that we are to be focused on Carmel. Since we meet only once a month for that infusion of Carmelite Spirituality and for that coming together for support and sharing as brothers and sisters in the Carmelite family, our time should be centered on Carmel. Our meetings are the best forum for growth in Carmelite Spirituality. Our community/group meetings should not turn into an informational meeting on current events.

We are so blessed to be in the Carmelite family. We are thankful for the many resources available to us. The Constitutions, the Statutes, and the Formation Guidelines answer all our many questions that arise in our communities/groups.