

PLANNING DYNAMIC MEETINGS
by Rebecca Lambert, OCDS

I. Introduction.

A. Let's begin this session with a prayer.

This is from the Office of Readings on the feast of our Mother St. Teresa of Jesus. (*Autobiography*, Ch. 22:14, and Prayer)

“ As often as we think of Christ we should recall the love with which he bestowed on us so many favors, and the great things God showed in giving us a pledge like this of his love; for love begets love. Let us strive to keep this always before our eyes and to waken ourselves to love. For if at some time the Lord should grant us the favor of impressing this love on our hearts, all will become easy for us and we shall carry out our tasks quickly and without much effort.”

“Father, by your Spirit, you raised up our Mother St. Teresa of Jesus to show your Church the way to perfection. May her inspired teaching awaken in us a longing for true holiness. Grant this through Christ our Lord. Amen.”

B. We are Carmelites in Community.

1. We read in our Constitutions, “The Secular Order is basically structured on the local community as a visible sign of the Church.” (*Const. #40*).
2. Our Provincial Statutes state that: “Because Community life is central to the Teresian Carmelite charism, attendance at the monthly meeting is required.” (*Provincial Statutes* Sec. XIII, para. 4)
3. *Const. #51* tells us that “the President . . . has the duty to convoke and preside over the meetings of the community. He should show fraternal service to all the members of the community; [and] foster a spirit of Christian and Carmelite affability . . .”
4. Therefore, in Christian charity and under the Teresian Carmelite charism, our monthly community meetings must be a force for growth in Christian maturity and Carmelite service to the Church. (cf. *Const. #34*).
5. Does a perfect OCDS Community exist? No, we're not in heaven yet; there's no perfect OCDS Community. We know that “the devil is prowling around like a roaring lion,” (1 Peter 5:8) but we're Carmelites. We “Put on the armor of God so that [we] may be able to stand firm.” (Ephesians 6:11).
6. Since “Proper Prior Planning Prevents Poor Performance,” here are a few ideas for planning dynamic meetings:

II. Encapsulating the ideal daily Carmelite life.

(cf. *Provincial Statutes*, Sec. XIII, para. 3)

A. Spoof on what a really bad, terrible, horrible, no-good meeting might look like.

“Well, here we are again. Well, a few of us anyway. Let me see now, what did I do with my agenda? Oh, there it is. Hmm. Okay now. We have a problem with people skipping meetings for no good reason. There’s just no excuse for that. I would never dream of boasting about it, but myself, I’ve never missed a meeting so far this year! And we haven’t been getting enough money to pay for the use of this room. We’ve just got to start calling our members and get them to come to meetings! Not one person even bothered to call me this month to say why they were skipping out and that’s just not acceptable. And, who made that awful coffee? We really need to recruit someone who knows how to make good coffee!

“Now it’s time to start reading our next book: *The Secret of the Rosary* by Saint Louis de Montfort. Who forgot to bring it with them? Well, you just won’t be able to follow along while I read it. I’m starting with the preface:

“Biographers have already told us much about Saint Louis De Montfort and the Rosary; now, with this first English edition of *The Secret of the Rosary*, we can listen to Saint Louis de Montfort speaking for himself...” [an interminable reading follows, so fast and so soft that no one can understand it!]

B. What might a good meeting look like?

If the President did the opposite of what you just heard, there would be at least seven changes.

1. For starters, the members and guests wouldn’t be insulted. Instead, they’d be warmly welcomed.
2. For everything to go as smoothly as possible, everyone - but especially the President - would come prepared for the meeting.
3. There would be more focus on the Community and our shared goals, and there would be less of “me, myself, and I.”
4. Difficulties would be resolved in Council meetings instead of just complaining about them at the monthly meetings.
5. Judging others is certainly not a sign of fraternal charity. Instead, we are called to give comfort and encouragement to one another.
6. We have a shared purpose in coming to our Carmelite meetings. Saint Louis de Montfort is a great saint for all the Church, but in our few hours together each month, we want to live our Carmelite life and study our Carmelite spirituality.
7. If something must be read aloud to the Community, strive to read it well.

C. How do we welcome members and guests?

You may have heard that the first four minutes of any encounter set the tone. Everyone needs a warm welcome. We call people by name, make eye contact, tell everyone how happy we are to see them, and ask about their families. In order to become a cohesive Community, all the members need to get to know each other well.

Be sure to introduce newcomers to someone who can guide them through the day - don't just leave them sitting by themselves or wandering in the hallway! It also helps to give each guest a nametag, and remind everyone else to wear one, too. It takes a while to learn the names of everyone in a large group.

As our Formation Guidelines tell us (page 11), "The entire Community welcomes and accompanies the Aspirants on their journey of discernment... [and] mentors [them] in all aspects of OCDS life." What could be a better example of fraternal charity in our Carmelite way of life than by giving everyone a warm welcome as soon as they arrive for the meeting?

And, just as we welcome those who are able to come, we **follow-up** with those who had to be absent - whether they were at work or traveling or sick or simply live too far away (cf. *Const.* #51). We contact those who were absent in charity, and we avoid laying guilt-trips.

D. How do we prepare for our meeting?

First, we need a **schedule** for our time together. Our *Provincial Statutes* (Sec. XIII, para. 3) specify the elements to be included. The purpose is to "encapsulate the ideal daily Carmelite life" in our monthly meeting, so we include "a conference by the Spiritual Assistant, quiet prayer, fraternal charity, the Liturgy of the Hours, devotion to Mary, formation, time for socializing and business as necessary. In order to accomplish this, the meeting ideally should be no less than four hours in length."

When preparing the agenda, the President might decide to put some announcements into a newsletter rather than extend the time that the business meeting takes. An example of what might go into such a newsletter is the dates we fast this year in preparation for our major Carmelite feasts. It's a courtesy to our members to alert them to the fact that we will anticipate four fast days this year because the feasts fall on Mondays. Since Sundays are always feast days, other days must be chosen for fasting. For example, the Solemnity of Saint Joseph, Husband of Mary, comes on March 19th. That's Monday of next week. Since we don't fast on Sunday, the 18th, we anticipate the solemnity by fasting on this coming Friday or Saturday, the 16th or 17th. You might notice that many of us will be feasting on Saturday, the 17th, for St. Patrick's Day. It may be more practical to fast on Friday, the 16th. The other three feasts that will come on a Monday this year are Our Blessed Lady of Mount Carmel (July 16th), St. Therese of the Child Jesus and the Holy Face (October 1st), and Our Holy Mother St. Teresa of Jesus (October 15th).

By **delegating** each of these elements of our meeting time, the President needs only to prepare for the business meeting and is free to “show fraternal service to all the members of the community; [and] foster a spirit of Christian and Carmelite affability, [while] being careful to avoid any demonstration of preference for some members over others...” (*Const.* #51).

It’s appropriate for the President, with the help of the Council, to delegate as much as possible to the members of the Community because, as our *Constitutions* tell us, giving service helps us to develop “a human, Christian and spiritual maturity for service to the Church. Human formation develops the ability for interpersonal dialogue, mutual respect and tolerance, the possibility of being corrected and correcting with serenity, and the capacity to persevere in commitments.” (*Const.* #34) And, as *Constitution* #46 tells us, “The primary responsibility of the Council is the formation and Christian and Carmelite maturing of the members of the community.”

When we’re able to give service, we act on our Christian values and grow in human maturity. Giving service is an important aspect of Carmelite formation that puts the teachings of Teresa and John of the Cross into practice. (cf. *Const.* #34) As it says in our Formation Guidelines (page 9), “Human formation develops the ability to become a supportive participant in community through service.”

Since so many graces come when offering service to others, every Carmelite does well to have a specific job to do at the monthly meetings.

E. How do we keep our focus on our common goals and have less of “me, myself, and I”?

What is our common goal, our ultimate purpose in living our Carmelite life? We “seek ‘mysterious union with God’ by way of contemplation and apostolic activity...for service to the Church” (*Const.* #8b). This union with God is our common goal and it is achieved by the perfection of charity within us. Our Mother Saint Teresa of Jesus received the grace of spiritual matrimony and is a guide to the spiritual life (*Const.* #7). Saint John of the Cross guides us to “the union of love, through the darkness of faith” (*The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, Ch. 9, #4). Formation in the teachings of Teresa and John of the Cross help us develop maturity for service to the Church (cf. *Const.* #34).

We might also turn to Saint Therese of the Child Jesus for help. In Chapter X of *Story of a Soul*, she wrote: “I understand now that **charity** consists in bearing with the faults of others, in not being surprised at their weakness, in being edified by the smallest acts of virtue we see them practice. But I understood above all that charity must not remain hidden in the bottom of the heart. Jesus has said: ‘No one lights a lamp and puts it under a bushel basket, but upon the lampstand, so as to give light to ALL in the house.’ It seems to me that this lamp represents charity which must enlighten and rejoice not only those who are dearest to us but ‘ALL who are in the house’ without distinction...” She prayed, “Lord, I know you don’t command the impossible. You know better than I do my weakness and imperfection; You know

very well that never would I be able to love my Sisters as You love them, unless *You, O my Jesus, loved them in me...* Yes, I feel it, when I am charitable, it is Jesus alone who is acting in me, and the more united I am to Him, the more also do I love my Sisters.”

And so it is that the more we are united with Jesus, the more we succeed in obeying His command to “love one another as I have loved you.” (John 15:12). Saint Therese asked, and we also may ask, “O my Jesus, love everyone in me.”

F. “The primary responsibility of the Council is the formation and Christian and Carmelite maturing of the members of the Community.”

(Const. #46)

It only makes sense that the **Council** needs to function well in order to lead the Community well. The President is responsible to show fraternal service and foster a spirit of Carmelite and Christian affability to all the members of the Community (*Const. #51*). If the spirit of service and affability is missing among the members of the Council, there will be harm to the Community. For this reason, we must be diligent in working together with friendly cheerfulness, praying for one another, and asking our good Lord for His grace for the sake of our Communities.

G. We are called to love one another.

The **social time** is a very important part of the monthly meeting. With the freedom to visit in small groups, it’s our best opportunity to show our love for one another. We begin by welcoming each other warmly. We make the effort to get to know the newer people and to keep in touch with the more senior members. It helps to share food from a common table that draws us together. A buffet table also moves us naturally from one group of people to another as we enter the line and then leave it.

The social time gives us opportunities to be of service. There is the set-up and clean-up crew, of course, but there’s also the person who brings a plate to someone who doesn’t walk easily. There are volunteers who help with the cleanup whether it’s their turn for that duty or not. There’s the person who brings the cake to help celebrate a special occasion.

H. We have a shared purpose, and we want to use our time well.

Every once in a while, a discussion during the business part of the meeting or in a formation class might move to an interesting subject that just isn’t Carmelite. The life of a non-Carmelite saint might be brought up, or a political issue, or maybe someone’s personal devotional materials. It could also happen that someone simply rambles on for too long.

A simple reminder is usually enough to keep us centered in our Carmelite spirituality. After all, Carmel is the one reason we come together each month, and there aren’t many opportunities outside of our meetings to discuss exclusively Carmelite topics. If someone at the meeting persists in bringing up non-Carmelite subjects, or is disruptive in other ways, they may need to be talked to privately about our expectations.

It happens from time to time that someone will ask to make an announcement about an upcoming event. If it's not strictly Carmelite, we might let them put a flyer on the table but don't take everyone's time to make an announcement about it. If someone recommends a good book but it's not by a Carmelite author or about a Carmelite saint, we might choose to share it among ourselves, but we won't take the time to suggest it to the Community.

III. Conclusion.

A. We now have a garland of virtues – or good works - for Presidents, bound by the thread of fraternal charity.

(cf. *Spiritual Canticle*, Stanza 30:9)

By the grace of God, and for the love of God, Presidents of our Secular Carmelite Communities are responsible for these good works:

1. Seeing that everyone receives a warm welcome to our monthly meetings.
2. Making sure that those who missed a meeting are contacted in charity.
3. Scheduling the meeting day to encapsulate the elements of our daily Carmelite life.
4. Delegating, with the help of the Council, as many responsibilities as possible so that all the members of the Community have an opportunity to make a commitment to service.
5. Working with the Council in a spirit of friendliness and service.
6. Arranging the social time so that new and senior members can get to know each other in a relaxed and friendly setting.
7. Helping us to use our meeting time well by keep the focus on our shared commitment to formation in Carmelite spirituality.

B. As our Mother Saint Teresa of Jesus tells us, love makes everything easy.

“...Love begets love... Let us strive to keep this divine love always before our eyes and to waken ourselves to love. For if at some time the Lord should favor us by impressing this love on our hearts, all will become easy for us, and we shall carry out our tasks quickly and without much effort. May His Majesty give [us] this love....” (*Life*, Ch. 22:14) Amen.