

“The Ideal Council as a Model of the Virtues”

by Lucy Okoh, OCDS

Let us begin with a prayer:

Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of the faithful, and kindle in them the fire of Thy love.

V. Send forth Thy Spirit, and they shall be created.

R. And Thou shalt renew the face of the earth.

Let us pray:

O God, Who hast taught the hearts of the faithful by the light of the Holy Spirit, grant that by the gift of the same Spirit we may be always truly wise and ever rejoice in His consolation. Through Christ Our Lord. Amen.

My talk today has been influenced by the following writers:

Father Gabriel of St. Mary Magdalene, O.C.D., *“Divine Intimacy”*

Father Paul Hinnebusch, O.P., *“The Beatitudes: Seeking the Joy of God’s Kingdom”*

Bishop Fulton J. Sheen, *“The Cross and the Beatitudes”*

And of course the *OCDS Constitutions and Provincial Statutes*

Today I am speaking on what a Model Council should look like through the eyes of the OCDS promise we have taken of Poverty, Chastity and Obedience. What this means is that we as Council members should model the Promise of Poverty, Chastity and Obedience in our lives in the workplace, at home with our families and in our OCDS meetings with our brothers and sisters in Carmel.

Before we examine how we should model the promise, let us look at what should be the model characteristic of the members of the Council.

In John 13, let’s see how Our Lord teaches us the meaning of a model council.

John 13: 3-5, 12-17. “He rises from supper, and lays aside his garments, and having taken a towel, girded himself. After that, he puts water into a basin, and began to wash the feet of the disciples, and to wipe them with the towel wherewith he was girded.”

Why would anyone wash their feet? We wash our hands before eating, but our feet? Well, at that time people traveled over dusty roads barefoot or with sandals. So as a courtesy to your guests, you would wash their feet so that they would feel comfortable as they dined.

Whose job is it to do this? The servant, the slave, the lowliest member of the household. And whose feet were washed? Everyone’s: even those who would deny him, betray him, doubt his word, abandon him.

“... Then after he had washed their feet. . . he said to them: *Know you what I have done to you? You call me Master, and Lord; and you say well, for so I am. If then I, being your Lord and Master, have washed your feet; you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have given you an example, that as I have done to you, so you do also. Amen, amen I say to you: The servant is*

not greater than his lord; neither is the apostle greater than he that sent him. If you know these things, you shall be blessed if you do them."

So what is Our Lord telling us? Our Lord has directed the Community Leaders to serve the Community members...to serve those who reject you; those who criticize you....to serve everyone.

So Our Lord accomplished the task with gentleness and meekness without any aversion to the task, but an all-embracing of the task without any double purpose. So as leaders we must joyfully find a suitable location for our meetings, provide nourishment for our members: both physical and spiritual. We as leaders must be eager to assist in passing out papers, arranging chairs, making everyone welcome and needed in the community. We must listen patiently, resolve differences with the grace of God, be compassionate and understanding, and see Christ in everyone.

Through service to our members we express our love.

How does Peter direct us to love God's flock?

1 Peter 5: 1-4. God's flock is in your midst; *give it a shepherd's care*. Watch over it *willingly* as God would have you do, not under constraint; and not for *shameful profit* either, but *generously*. Be *examples* to the flock, not lording it over those assigned to you, so that when the chief Shepherd appears you will win for yourselves the unfading crown of glory.

Peter tells us we love our members by willingly and generously serving them; that we love our members by being good examples to our members.

We are to LOVE all. We are to see Christ in everyone. St. Therese of the Child Jesus knows that we must seek out members who are sensitive or lack judgment or education or those we have a natural aversion to. These are members suffering through natural and moral imperfections. Charity teaches us to endure all things with a smiling, serene face, never showing ourselves annoyed or crushed by the burden. (*Divine Intimacy*, p. 803)

We have to be accepting of all disappointments, trials, difficulties as sent by God to us so that we can grow in virtue. To cooperate with God's grace we humbly accept his will with love and patience and gratitude.

In 1 Corinthians St. Paul says: "By the grace of God, I am what I am, and His grace in me hath not been void." (1 Cor 15: 10)

A possible trial or difficulty could be when our Spiritual Assistant cannot attend our meeting or when we were locked out of the building for our meeting. Remember these trials are sent to us to help us grow in the virtue of patience. We have to scramble to find the keys or to rearrange the schedule, and all is down with the grace of God.

How do we acquire this love? We cannot create love. We are an empty vessel needing to be filled. We can only receive *infused love* by receiving the sacraments, through prayer, and from our time spent in the presence of the Lord during Adoration as we contemplate LOVE ITSELF. This is the love that we can then give to others. So we have to spend quiet time in prayer to absorb the LOVE Our Lord gives to us.

We have already said we demonstrate this love by serving. How else do we demonstrate love?

Love is shown through mercy and forgiveness.

In Luke 6, 36: “Be ye therefore merciful, as your Father also is merciful.” (Luke 6, 36) When we feel irritated, we should remember the infinite mercy of God and put aside all resentment, anger, and harshness. We should remember that God forgets our faults and is ready to embrace us at all times. In Mt 18, 22 Our Lord tells us to forgive others “. . . seventy times seven times.” (Mt 18, 22) Because someone has offended us or made us suffer, should we forget that we have offended God? As John of the Cross states: “In the evening of life, we shall be judged on love.” (*J.C. SM I*, 57)

Love is shown through fraternal charity.

If we are offended at what is said about us, how can we then be insensitive to exposing the faults of others? So we should not speak poorly of others nor listen to others do so. John of the Cross states, “Never listen to the weaknesses of others, and, if anyone complains to thee of another, thou may tell him humbly to say naught of it to thee.” (*SM II*, 61. 7)

St. Therese tells us that when we are tempted to see the defects of our sister, we should quickly think of her good virtues. Many times when a member has offended us, we tend to emphasize their faults and not see their good intentions. We have to counter those thoughts with positive acts of charity, like praying for that member and acting kindly toward them.

We can show fraternal charity through anticipation of the needs of the Community. We should be alert to information that concerns the Community. The Community needs to know the formation requirements, needs to be aware of Provincial updates and Community updates, and member news.

Fraternal charity is shown through generously and willingly completing the duties required by the Council in the Constitutions and by not expecting a thank you for doing our duties.

Now we have seen how Our Lord directs us to serve our members. We see that our service is done out of love. And that love is acquired through prayer.

Now let’s examine how the Council models the Promise of Chastity, Poverty and Obedience in fulfilling its service to the community. Let’s look at each one separately.

How does the Council model the Promise of Chastity?

The Constitutions tell us “. . . to love God above all else, and to love others with the love God has for them...the Secular Carmelite seeks the freedom to love God and neighbor unselfishly giving witness to the divine intimacy promised by the beatitude: blessed are the pure of heart for they shall see God” (Section II, #13).

Is it enough to fulfill the Promise of Chastity by avoiding sinful actions of adultery or must I keep pure in my heart as well?

We can find the answer in Psalm 24: “Who can stand in his holy place? The clean of hand and pure of heart, who are not devoted to idols, who have not sworn falsely.”

What are idols? *Idols* could be our attachments to honor in our enjoyment when we are praised by our members. Idols could be our attachment to our position as leaders. Idols could be our attachment to the feeling of being accepted. Idols could be our enjoyment of praise, position, and acceptance.

What does it mean to swear falsely? *To swear falsely* could be to act with a double purpose. Are we doing this service for the love of God or so that we will be well liked by others?

A pure moral life flows only from a heart that is pure and sincere toward God. Purity of heart concerns our direct relationship with God, being utterly sincere with Him, single-hearted in seeking Him alone. Purity of heart is freedom from idols: freedom from attachments or a desire for worthless things. The Holy Spirit dwelling in our hearts and filling us with love of God firmly attaches our hearts to God. A sign to us that we are practicing purity of heart is when our hearts are peaceful in not desiring things. Another sign is when we reach out to others in mercy and live with them in peace and justice.

Psalm 15 states that we need to deal uprightly with our neighbor if we wish to dwell with God. “O Lord, who may abide in your tent? Who may dwell on your holy Hill? Those who walk blamelessly and do what is right and speak the truth from their heart.”

Our Lord, who is the embodiment of all purity, is detached from the ego, is so unselfish and is so thoughtless of the flesh that he looks upon His Mother, not uniquely as His own, but as the Mother of us all. Perfect purity is perfect selflessness. That is why Christ gives His Mother to us, in the person of John, saying: “Behold your mother.”

So our Promise of Chastity is purity that is unselfishness; Promise of Chastity is surrender, Promise of Chastity is thoughtfulness of others, Promise of Chastity is sacrifice.

How does the Council model the Promise of Poverty?

The Constitutions tell us: “The promise of poverty seeks an evangelical use of the goods of this world and of personal talents, as well as the exercise of personal responsibilities in society, in family, and work, confidently placing all in the hands of God.” (OCDS Constitutions, Section II, #14)

Poverty of spirit, which is true humility, includes a healthy fear of one’s weakness, which is the capacity for straying into sin. In our fear of our own weakness we learn to trust more completely in God the Father. Our Lord tells us to “become like children.” Children know their neediness and helplessness. So we must run to God, admitting our helplessness and our need for salvation. We must be turned away from our pride, self-centeredness, self-sufficiency, and toward the Father in child like trust.

When little children have disagreements, don’t they run to their father for help?

When we have distractions, such as a disagreement between members, shouldn’t we first put it in the hands of the Lord asking for His guidance and grace in resolving the issue?

When we are left without a Spiritual Assistant again, we go as a little child and ask for Our Lord's help and then start making those contacts. Whether we have a Spiritual Assistant or not, it is God's will. He will give us the grace in other areas to build our Carmelite identity. He wants us to trust in Him.

Who is our model for the Poor in Spirit? Christ is the highest model of the Poor in Spirit.

Christ was detached from wealth. He was born in a cave, became a carpenter like St. Joseph, he was stripped of his garments and buried in a stranger's grave.

Christ was detached from social position. Bethlehem, Nazareth and Jerusalem abandoned Him. His disciples abandoned Him. The Jewish people abandoned Him.

Christ became spiritually poor for the intellectually proud (those who think they know without faith). Christ's soul is described as "sorrowful unto death". Christ experienced the greatest poverty of all – spiritual poverty of the seemingly abandonment by His Father: "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?"

To live our promise of poverty of spirit we live a life of humble, childlike trust and hope in God. We follow Christ's detachment from wealth, social position, and intellectual pride. As Council members we do not make things happen. Our Lord allows us to willingly fulfill His will. He allows us to fail so that we can humbly correct ourselves. It is all in His plan.

We can practice poverty of spirit when things go wrong by readily admitting that we were at fault as we remember Christ's poverty of spirit. We accept the responsibility of our actions, not shifting the blame to someone else.

How does the Council model the Promise of Obedience?

The Constitutions state, "The promise of obedience is a pledge to live open to the will of God" as found "...in those who have responsibility for guiding the community and the Order in discerning and accepting God's ways: the Community's Council, the Provincial and the General." (OCDS Constitutions, Section II, #15)

St. John of the Cross has said, "God wants from us the least degree of obedience and submission, rather than all the works we desire to offer Him" (SM I, 13).

The perfection of charity, the essence of union with God, consists in surrendering our will to the will of God as expressed in the orders of our superiors. Charity is perfect in us when we govern ourselves by God's will, not our personal desires or inclinations.

Where do we find the will of God?

God's will is expressed in His commandments, in the precepts of the Church, in the duties of our state of life. That sounds easy: the Ten Commandments, the teachings of the Church and the OCDS Constitutions.

What are the obstacles to obedience to the will of God?

One of the greatest obstacles to uniting our will to God's will is our attachment to our own desires and inclinations, what we want to do.

Another obstacle is when we fail to see God in our superiors or in our Council members, because we feel they are inferior in age, culture, experience, or ability. We fail to realize that God has placed them over us to direct us. Our duty is to subject ourselves in filial humility, to allow ourselves to be guided and governed. We must humble ourselves as our Lord "emptied Himself, taking the form of a servant, being made in the likeness of men..."

Where do we find the perfect example of obedience?

Our Lord is obedient to His Father, to his earthly parents and to civil and religious authorities.

In John 6, 38 Our Lord states, *"I came down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him that sent Me"* (John 6, 38).

In Luke 2, 51 Our Lord submitted Himself to Joseph and Mary, who had natural authority over Him. *"He was subject to them"* (Luke 2, 51).

In St. Paul's letter to the Philippians 2,8 Our Lord submitted to civil and religious authorities, His judges and executioners, making Himself *"obedient unto death, even death on the Cross"* (Phil 2,8).

God has given everyone a free will. Every man is free to govern himself according to his own judgment and personal views. Anyone who takes the promise of obedience uses his freedom to renounce this right, *voluntarily* offering his will as a free holocaust for the service, worship, and glory of God. So by surrendering the freedom of his own will, he renounces himself. Obedience sacrifices everything selfish in our being – our attachments to our opinions, inclinations, and our personal demands. Obedience does not destroy our personality, but enables it to surrender itself to adhere entirely to God, to His holy, sanctifying will.

The Council is given *the grace of office*. The Council must be open to this grace. We must act as a Council in decision-making, not one person, but as a Council. All members are free to express their views knowing that all discussion stays within the Council. Knowing our weaknesses, we pray for Our Lord's guidance and that we are open to His insights in decision making. True poverty is hope and trust in God. The Council submits to the will of God through our superiors as contained in the Constitutions, Statutes and Formation Guidelines.

In conclusion, The Ideal Council as a Model of the Virtues is fulfilled by living our Promise of Poverty, Chastity, and Obedience in the service of our Community.

We have seen how Our Lord is the perfect model of service. We have seen how we grow in virtue through living our Promise of Poverty of spirit, of Chastity in purity of heart, and of Obedience in total abandonment of our will to Our Lord. Let us to continue to grow in the peace and love of Our Lord.

The Ideal Council as a Model of the Virtues That Make a Community Work Well

By Thelma Prisco, OCDS

Introduction—How can your leader, or Council, become a model of the virtues that make your group work well?

First let us review some of the differences that exist between groups/study groups and Canonically established communities.

1. A Group is typically smaller than a Community with few “seasoned” Carmelites in it. They may not have a council, leaving the leader to make decisions.
2. The focus of the group is not in maintaining a Carmelite presence, but in creating one. If you, as leader, are the only one in your group who has made promises, there is much you can do to strengthen the Carmelite presence. First and foremost, be faithful to your prayer life and all the Secular Carmelite Disciplines. Be kind and considerate to everyone and remember: “Whatever you do to the least of these, you do to me.” See Christ in everyone you meet.
3. Your potential human resources are smaller and income & funds are less. Your people will have fewer talents to draw upon and may not be as motivated as you would like them to be, both of which may require the Leader to take on several responsibilities.
4. Do you have an adequate meeting place? Is it well suited to the size of your group? Is it well located?
5. Do you have a Spiritual Assistant?

What can you do as a Leader/Council member to help form your members into a Carmelite community?

1. I would put, in prime of place, prayer and the OCDS Way of Life. Encouragement and assistance will be needed here. This gradually becomes easier as it becomes a habit.

Include Morning or Evening Prayer, and Mass if possible, in your meeting time together. Teach your group how to say Morning and Evening prayer.

2. Become familiar with the Constitutions and the Provincial Statutes, as well as the Rule of St. Albert; these can be learned as a group by including it in your Monthly meeting agenda. These are essential documents.
3. Encourage and emphasize the importance of attending meetings. “Attendance at meetings is required. Lack of regular attendance without excuse or notification is a negative indication of a vocation. (see Provincial Statutes, Sec. XIII, # 4.) This is for the good of all, including the

individual, no matter how long they have been in Carmel. No one is ever “finished” in their Carmelite spiritual life.

4. Look around you and see if there are others in your group who would likely be an asset to your group as a Councilor. These could be discussed with and should be approved by our provincial delegate before appointing anyone. If you find one or two who are devoted to Carmel, who have made at least a Temporary Promise, and who could work with you, you can get together in Council Meetings and discuss any matters of importance that come up. Other ideas can be helpful and can also take some of the decision making responsibilities off of the Leader.

5. Problems will come up that need to be met and you (or you and your Council) will need to work out solutions to them. It is good and advisable to consult your Spiritual Assistant, especially on delicate matters, ie., correcting a member when necessary.

6. As early as possible the Leader needs to start Aspirancy and Formation classes with their group. These also, can be done as a group during your regular meetings.

7. We should always listen to and seriously consider the opinions of others in your community, but be prepared, also, to oppose their opinions, in kindness and charity, if that is needed. For example, one of your members may be excited over some inspiring DVD or audio, or some recent apparitions, but if it is not Carmelite, it would not be appropriate to promote it within a meeting, even though it may be of excellent quality. Our meetings are for growing in our Carmelite identity and community; however, those same things can be shared outside of the meeting, privately.

The Council

1. All Council members should be professed, and the group leader must be definitively professed. This ensures a certain commitment to the Order and the Secular Carmelite life.

2. Since your community is a Group and not an established Community, elections are not held and the leader will need to decide who would make a councilor that could be helpful to the group. I would recommend someone who has a well-established prayer life, loves the faith, who can set a good example, is committed to Carmel, and who exhibits common sense.

3. If you have a Spiritual Assistant, he should be included in your Council meetings, if possible.

4. All Councilors and Leaders should set a good example to their group by the piety of their lives and the kindness and respect they show to others. The others will be looking to you for this kind of direction and you can truly be a good influence for them. What this means is that Councilors and Leaders should be doing their best to live a life of holiness.

“We should live a life of allegiance to Jesus Christ”... “unswerving in the service of the Master”... “pondering the Lord’s law day and night and keeping watch in prayer”; (see The Rule of St. Albert, #2 & #10,) and as St. Teresa tells us, “through friendship with the one we know loves us.” If leaders and council members are not willing to commit themselves to this, how can we ask others to do so? Above all, pray, pray always and look always to do His will alone.

Group Apostolates

1. The Council can consider any number of group apostolates and should consider:

- a) Is this something our whole group can participate in?
- b) Would this be an effective way to encourage our Carmelite life and community?
- c) Is there enthusiasm within the group for the chosen or suggested apostolate?
- d Is this something the whole group can make a commitment to and continue?
- e) Is this something others outside of our group can well benefit by? Or should this be an individual’s apostolate?

2. A strong group apostolate can help to strengthen the community and get it more involved in providing service to the Lord.

Closing:

Let us pray. May the love of your Holy Spirit direct our hearts and our lips, and may we always act in accordance with your holy will.