

Just in Time Advice for New Councils

by Jo Ann Murphy, OCDS

First of all, thank you for agreeing to share yourself, your gifts and your time as a member of your Community's Council for the next Triennium! The Holy Spirit will certainly not let you down for saying "yes," but will provide you with amazing graces as you serve out your term.

It is always a good idea to review during one of your first meetings together what the Constitutions and Statutes say about your roles and responsibilities as Council members. You will discover that the Council itself is the immediate authority of the OCDS Community, not the President or Director of Formation, and that leadership is shared equally by all members of the Council. This is quite different from what you may experience in other groups where one person acts as the "highest" authority and "leader" of the group. This means that each member of the Council has the responsibility to pray to the Holy Spirit for guidance and weigh in by sharing their inspiration, wisdom and ideas. It is helpful to try and shed any purely human notions you might have and really open yourself up to where the Holy Spirit is leading you. What is important is that each member of the Council have an active voice in discussions and not leave this up to one or two individuals. Once all opinions are heard and discussed freely, then the Council can come to the best conclusion. One member should never feel shy about sharing an opinion that is different from that of another. It is not a personal rejection of the other person's idea, but simply a different perspective, one that is needed if the Council is to function in a healthy way.

The President is responsible for arranging Council meetings, setting the Agenda (with input from other Council members), presiding at the meeting, and being the spokesperson for the Council. The President makes sure each Council member weighs in during a discussion. And the Council as a whole makes decisions regarding Community expenditures, setting the Budget for the current year, deciding on Formators for classes and reviewing the lesson plans for all formation classes. The most important and challenging task of the Council is to make discernments regarding the status of members (entry into the Community, admittance to Clothing, Promises, the vow, etc.) and to track their progress in formation throughout the year.

The Director of Formation may make recommendations to the Council regarding the best Formators for classes, material to be used in formation classes, etc., but the Council must weigh in and discern, with the help of the Holy Spirit, whether this plan is best for the Community. Again, each Council member must contribute to this discussion in order to fulfill their responsibility to the Community. Even if they agree with the recommendations, they should be able to say why they agree with them, and not just say "That is ok with me." Of course, it is always easier to "go with the flow" and not create "waves" by jumping in with a minority opinion, but this is a temptation you should try to recognize and overcome during your tenure on the Council. Your voice is an important, even crucial, one!

Even though each Council member shares equal responsibility and leadership, only the President acts as the voice to and for the Community. In other words, you can't have five different leaders each giving different orders to the same person in the Community! And you

cannot have any one person on the Council representing the Community to outside organizations without the knowledge and express approval of the entire Council.

An effective Council is one in which each member accepts responsibility for the whole Community, contributes freely during Council meetings, prays, prays, prays before making a discernment, and makes sure all persons on the Council are equally aware of any Community issues. In other words, if a member sends you an email with a question or about an issue, the entire Council is always copied on the response.

Finally, if a Council determines that one of its members cannot function effectively for any reason it is incumbent on the Council to discuss this freely and openly in order to make a determination as to whether that person should step down and another be named. Being a Council member is not an honorary position! If you are not able to participate on a regular basis as a Council member, you should take the initiative to bring this issue to the entire Council. Then the Council as a whole decides on the best option going forward.

Please feel free to consult with a member of the Provincial Council if you need assistance, and remember to remain open to the promptings of the Holy Spirit in all you do. May God bless you all abundantly for your tireless service to Him and your Communities!

[Note: There is wonderful guidance for Councils on the OCDS Provincial website (thereseocds.org) under Best Practices/Council.]