

Councils and Formation

Revised April 2018 from *Some Notes on Discernment*

Best practices are not binding as policy. Local Councils are free to adapt these recommendations to local circumstances.

Original Sources

The *Ratio Institutionis* is the best current guide to OCDS formation. Following the *Ratio* will help ensure a strong formation program. Ongoing discernment may be confidently based on the qualities described in this important document. The *Ratio* makes the point that we don't look for perfection, but for steady progress and potential.

The *OCDS Constitutions*, especially the first half, set out the aims and ideals of Carmelite life. Review them often to assess and guide formation.

Some Points to Keep in Mind

“What we have here is a failure to communicate.”

Clear communication is indispensable. From early on help candidates to understand that this is a vocation to a religious order, and has both a subjective and objective dimension.

Be aware that some people come to Carmel looking only for a prayer group or a course in spirituality. If they are not interested in exploring a religious vocation, they may want to look at the courses offered by the Carmelite Institute of North America <https://carmeliteinstitute.net/>, or they may prefer to try a parish organization or a diocesan program.

Councils need to know how to recognize the difference between a mere attraction to Carmelite spirituality and an attraction to the whole package. By the time for the First Promise, there must be a sincere desire to commit to the community and the Order – its charism, its responsibilities, and its mission.

Slow and steady wins the race

Formation is the mutual responsibility of the candidate and the Council. A person can't expect to be accepted just because he wants it. He must be honest with himself about why he wants to be a Carmelite, and also whether he is *able* to be a Carmelite. How well is he able to integrate the obligations of the vocation into his life?

The Council and formators help with this self-knowledge through honest and open dialogue. Candidates are more likely to be frank about themselves in an atmosphere of empathy and trust. Show appreciation for what is going well. Give encouragement and support for efforts to improve. Make any corrections with respect, calmness, and compassion.

In discernments, look for consistent determination, faithfully followed through on. It is not a matter of rapid and easy “perfection” and certainly not “well, I'm not actually doing it now, but will someday.” It is a matter of perseverance and continual progress.

The formator's role

Formators walk with the candidates as teachers, guides, companions, and role models. Beyond studying and discussing the materials, the candidates must internalize the “spirit of Carmel” – a hunger to seek the face of God in contemplative prayer, and following Christ in poverty,

chastity, obedience, and the beatitudes. There is community life to grow into and a sense of connection with the Order. These are more “caught” than taught.

If a class is large, consider having co-formators so that all the candidates can receive the mentoring they need. Choose members who are mature in the vocation and have good interpersonal skills.

As the formators accompany candidates through formation, they need to pay attention to how the candidates engage. Do they come prepared? Do they enjoy the discussions and “get the point”? Do they apply what they learn to daily life? The Formation Director is responsible to talk with the formators about their candidates and how best to help individuals.

We are companions on the journey

Read and reflect on Constitutions article 24.

The basis for this article is concern for each person’s ongoing formation and contribution to the formation of others in the community. When a member is truly present in community, engaged and attentive, he grows in holiness himself and also helps his fellow Carmelites’ spiritual growth and wellbeing.

The Council must not only keep an eye on the candidates’ attendance, but also how they contribute to community life in general. Guide candidates to value the meetings as a positive good, not just a requirement to fulfill.

Community life skills

Speaking of which. In addition to prayer life, attendance, and study, Councils encourage everyone in:

- detachment from personal preferences
- a positive and charitable view of others
- self-knowledge and openness to correction
- willing cooperation with the superiors of the Order
- a habit of listening attentively and dialoguing constructively
- eagerness to help other members
- reliable follow-through with assigned community jobs

Personality red flags

The following are some habits that can greatly harm a community:

- persistence about getting one’s own way, self-centeredness
- dwelling on the faults of others while hiding one’s own
- being touchy, short-tempered, moody or sulky, holding grudges
- gossiping or meddling, feeding conflicts
- not following through on responsibilities
- refusing to take a community job or help with the community apostolate

That does **not** mean Councils kick someone out the moment they are unpleasant. It **does** mean that Councils don’t ignore negative behaviors. They talk with the person about correcting the problem. Candidates ought not to be accepted for the Promise if they are not able to overcome bad attitudes.

Taking care of business

The Council should not wait until the end of the formation period to address problems. As soon as they see an issue, they need to work with the candidate to explore solutions. (See the conflict resolution articles on the website under Best Practices – Community. Also see *Annual Check-in and Addressing Concerns* under Best Practices - Formation)

How the candidate responds shows the state of his formation. Constitutions art. 34:

“... Human formation develops the ability for interpersonal dialogue, mutual respect, tolerance, the possibility of being corrected and correcting with serenity, and the capacity to persevere in our commitments.”

Other Resources

Councils may want to refer to Fr. Aloysius Deeney’s articles ***Profile of an OCDS*** and ***The New OCDS Legislation and the Vocation to Carmel***. Both are on the provincial website under Formation Materials – Aspirancy.

In *Profile*, Fr. Aloysius discusses six elements that describe a Secular Carmelite. Father makes it clear that it is not any *one* of the six elements that indicate a vocation. It is *the combination* of all of them together. In *The New OCDS Legislation*, Father describes what Carmelites do on a daily basis. These are the visible responsibilities of the vocation. Again, it is not any one of them in particular, but the combination of all in harmony and balance.