

A Word about the Spiritual Assistant
by Fr. Bonaventure Sauer, OCD

Some of you, I know, have had trouble finding a spiritual assistant. Some communities simply cannot find anyone to fill the office and so have more or less given up looking. But what exactly should we expect of a spiritual assistant? Why is a community asked to have one, to begin with? What is required of him or her? [In order to serve as a spiritual assistant, one needs to be either a priest, a deacon, or a consecrated person—that is, a religious brother or sister.] How the Order understands the office and its responsibilities is, I think it safe to say, presently in a state of flux. But let me say something about it. My hope is that, by having a clearer idea of the office in relation to the local community, you will better understand why it is there and what is to be expected of a spiritual assistant.

Your *Constitutions* do not have a lot to say about the office of spiritual assistant. What they do say is found in n.44, with a kind of footnote in n.45. What, we might ask, is the context of n.44? *The Secular Order is juridically dependent on the Discalced Carmelite Friars.* That statement is found at the beginning of n.41 of your *Constitutions* and then spelled out further through two subsequent numbers, nn.42, and 43. Nn.44, which speaks of the spiritual assistant, follows therefore as an application *on the local level* of this relationship between the Secular Order and the Discalced Carmelite Friars. In keeping with this context, then, your *Constitutions* assume that the spiritual assistant is to be—at least “usually”—a friar of the Order.

In other words, the role and responsibilities of the spiritual assistant, as envisioned by your *Constitutions*, are an application on the local level of the ministry of the friars to the Seculars. It is the delegation of a particular friar to assist a particular OCDS community with spiritual and pastoral care, Carmelite teaching, fraternal guidance and counsel, all that the Secular Order as a whole seeks from the Discalced Carmelite Friars as members of the same religious family. By having a spiritual assistant, then, the local community has a specifically designated friar whom they can turn to as needed.

Thus, the first thing to be said about the spiritual assistant is that, if at all possible, he should be a friar of the Order. This might be preferable even where the friar, living at a distance, is able to attend only two or three meetings a year. Whenever he does attend, he might also be invited to meet with the local council, although that would not be necessary. Otherwise, he would receive a copy of the monthly minutes and be included on the official email list for other communications. In this way, he could keep current with what’s going on with the community. Of course, the president (on behalf of the council) or the formation director might from time to time contact him via phone or email in order to seek his advice or counsel in some matter touching on formation, the apostolate, or difficulties in community. As spiritual assistant, he would also be the one asked to preside at special ceremonies such as clothings and professions.

The spiritual assistant, as you know, need not be a friar of the Order. Indeed, sometimes that might be preferable, given the circumstances and location of a particular community. N.45 of your *Constitutions* describes the special delegation needed when the spiritual assistant is not a friar of the Order. The arrangement is viewed as an exception,

though, since the role of the spiritual assistant is really meant to be an expression of the relationship of the Seculars with the friars.

In this case the spiritual assistant, living nearby, would be more readily available to attend meetings on a regular basis. But that does not mean that he or she must or even should attend all such meetings, let alone be expected to give a talk or conference whenever he or she does. Each local community is responsible for its own ongoing formation. If that means inviting the spiritual assistant to give a conference to the community—or to one or other group in formation—then so be it. That would certainly be a good idea. But there is no reason to presume that such talks or conferences are to be a regular part of his or her responsibilities to the community.

Let me summarize what I would regard as the basic responsibilities of the spiritual assistant:

(1) To attend the monthly meeting at least a couple times a year, and perhaps meet with the local council on such occasions;

(2) To keep in touch with the community and be available (at least via email) for consultation by the president, on behalf of the council, or by the formation director;

(3) To assist the local council as needed in the evaluation of candidates in initial formation;

(4) To give an occasional conference to the community on some topic of adult religious or spiritual formation as determined by the council;

(5) To preside at a mass of profession (in the case of a priest) or a clothing ceremony, or some other special liturgy of the community.

In recognition of his or her service to the community, the spiritual assistant should of course receive a regular stipend, even if he is a friar of the Order.

I would suggest that any community presently looking for a spiritual assistant draw up some such short list of expectations so that all will be very clear about what exactly is involved. Where a community already has a spiritual assistant, it might be good to discuss with him or her just what is expected. That way all can make sure they're on the same page.