

Leadership Roles in the OCDS Community
By Elizabeth M Korves OCDS

The growth and well-being of a community are in large part dependent upon the way in which the gift of leadership is exercised. Good leadership is leadership that is servant leadership. It is leadership that reminds us of the essentials, supports and affirms the members of the community and also calls those members to assume responsibility within the community. Many of us have experienced and are aware of communities and situations where a more negative approach to leadership has found expression and the harm it can do to a community. Today, I hope that together we can find some good ideas of how to develop that positive, servant leadership quality within our communities.

Leadership and the more administrative/organizational aspects of Carmel is a topic that sometimes gets mixed reactions. I have heard many Secular Carmelites complain about why do we have to focus on the Constitutions and Statutes? Why do we need to spend so much time talking about the organizational aspects of Carmel? Our focus should be on prayer, on spirituality, not on this other more bureaucratic stuff. The Provincial Council in my province once had a potential new group that point blank told us that they did not want to be bothered with the governing part of the Constitutions, they did not want to have a president and secretary and such.

I fully agree that our focus in so many ways is and should be on prayer and our Carmelite spirituality. However, we ARE a religious order. We joined an organization that is large and far reaching. In the United States alone, there are approximately 250 canonical communities and study groups between the three provinces. The Order has a certain amount of structure to it. There are the communities/study groups which in turn belong to and are accountable to the provinces which belong to and are accountable to the larger Order. When we make our

Promise, we make a commitment not just to the life of prayer, but we also made a commitment “to the superiors of the Order and to you, my brothers and sisters”.¹ We are accountable to each other. This also means we need to take care of each other and of the community. This care needs to involve not just spiritual matters but also the more practical matters involved in keeping a community (and even the larger province and Order) functioning in a way that promotes “the formation and Christian and Carmelite maturing”² of our members.

At each level of leadership in the Order - the local community, the province, and the generalate in Rome, there are things which call for leadership in order to our mission to be accomplished. Meetings must take place. This involves having a meeting space, access to that meeting space, sometimes the need to set up and take down chairs and tables, someone to preside at the meetings, an agenda to be set, people to lead the Office, those to bring/arrange any refreshments, those to welcome newcomers. There are financial matters to be dealt with – the collection of dues, maintaining of bank accounts, reports to the community, council, province and Order to show the moneys are being properly used. There are personnel matters to be dealt with – discernment of vocations, how to call someone back into community life that is not coming to meetings, how to handle a problem person. There is a need for those who provide formation – training of the formators, handouts that might be needed, lessons to plan and give.

Provincial Councils and the General Definitory deal with much the same things just over a wider geographical area. They have their own meetings, congresses and chapters to organize, their own finances to account for, and their own concerns of how to form those called to the various roles of leadership at the different levels of the Order. So the servant leadership skills we

¹ Ritual of the Secular Order, #42

² OCDS Constitutions, Art. 46

work to develop at the local community level are the same servant leadership skills which we hope are also exercised at the province and generalate level.

I have just touched upon the some of the many practical things which need to be taken care of by our members. But I know that many communities run into the problem of people not being willing to serve in these various servant leadership roles. This resistance to serve usually gets expressed most strongly at election time. So let's look at some of the reasons we hear for why people are not willing to serve.

One of the more common things I've heard is the notion that "I'm not worthy". Frankly, I've never thought of all the hard work involved in serving the community as something that involved worthiness. I looked up worthy and worthiness in the dictionary and it denotes a sense of being entitled to something, or deserving something like respect or recognition. This is a misguided notion of what servant leadership should be about. If we are following the example of Jesus, we should not be concerned about respect and recognition but rather we should be concerned about what is good for the community. I also looked up the definition of servant and it includes the notion of carrying out the orders of someone else and of being a devoted follower. In Carmel, as servants we seek the will of God, God's orders for what is good for the community. Not what is good for me, but what is good for the community. This involves being open to listening to the concerns and input of our members and then taking things to prayer as part of any decisions we make and actions we take for the community.

Related to this concern about worthiness, there is a fear of making a wrong decision or of being unpopular and often a fear of having to deal with conflict. Any of us who has ever been in a leadership position whether in Carmel or our jobs or even within our own families, know that we will make mistakes and people will sometimes not be happy with the decisions we make.

Again, we need to look away from ourselves to the good of the community. As servant leaders we need to be open and ready to listen to those who disagree with us. We need to pay attention to more than just to our friends and admirers because sometimes those who have different ideas from us are the ones who call us to grow. God might be using that different point of view to remind us of charity and that He does not act in just one way. I think of the story of the wedding of Cana where Mary basically disagreed with Jesus ignoring the couple's need and reminded him of his own call to servant-hood.

On the flip side, the members of the community are often well aware of the failings of their leaders and many will be happy to tell you about it in great detail. But the fact of the matter is, we are called to remain in communion with those whom we've elected into leadership. We are called on both sides to remember charity. Both our servant leaders and those not in leadership need to remember to keep our eyes on that which is essential – the deepening our relationship with God. And that involves love of neighbor which certainly includes those with whom we are in community.

Another common reason people give for not wanting to serve in the leadership of our Order is that they do not have the time. This is a legitimate concern as we all have our family obligations, work, our individual Carmelite prayer obligations, etc to fit into days that often do not have enough hours in them. Secular Carmel is a vocation and as such involves commitment and making it a priority in our life. One member of my community likes to remind the rest of us that our priorities should be God, then family, then Carmel, then everything else. Making Carmel one of the top priorities in our life may mean saying no to other activities such as some of our parish or civic involvements. We all know this in relation to making our daily prayer a priority but we also need to think in these terms in relation to our service within the Order.

I love the attitude of a former president of my community. She felt that if asked to be on the ballot at election time, this was God's will. If elected to the council, again, she viewed this as God's will. I think this is how we should all look at it when our community or our province or the larger Order approaches us to serve in some leadership capacity. Instead of worrying about am I worthy or will this be easy or will I have to move around some of the priorities of how I spend my time, we need to think of it in terms of "God is calling me to give, to serve in this way at this time".

I have one practical suggestion to make for election time to help counter some of these reasons people give for not being willing to serve. This came out of a situation that developed in one community in my province when no one agreed to be on the ballot as president. I think the way it was handled is a good model for approaching our elections. The nominating committee asked each voting member of the community (only those professed have the right to vote) to pray with the community roster. Each person was asked to submit the names of those who they thought would be a good president for the community and the reasons why they thought this person would make a good president. The nominating committee then compiled the reasons for each potential president (removing the names of who provided the reasons so they were anonymous). The committee approached those individuals about being on the ballot and said "here are the reasons that the community has identified for why you would be a good president". This resulted in three individuals agreeing to be on the ballot and all three shared that it was in reading the reasons provided by the community that convinced them to agree to serve.

This method could easily be expanded and used as part of the nominating process for the full council. It involves a bit more work on the part of the nominating committee and on the part

of the professed members of the community, but its one way that God can speak through the full community to call forth servant leaders.

I've been talking mostly so far about the obvious roles of servant leadership in our communities, the council. However there are many other servant leadership roles that need to be filled in order for a community to function. In addition to the council, the Constitutions require that there be a treasurer and a secretary. Other roles which might be needed in a community, depending upon its size, are infirmarian, liturgist, hospitality, retreat coordinator, librarian, and I even know of a community that has its own small newsletter so there's an editor. These additional behind the scenes roles within the community provide a great opportunity for developing leadership. These support roles can be filled by members who are not on the council so that the council can concentrate on the larger well-being of the community. Some communities in my province have two people working together in each of these roles, so that the newer members of the community can learn from the older ones on how to do the various things. Many communities have developed a community policy manual that outlines the duties for each of these roles so those who are asked to serve will know what is expected for that position.

It is important that ALL members of the community know that they are expected to contribute in some way to the more concrete side of community life. Art 6a of our Constitutions remind us that one of the principles of Carmelite life is "being concerned for the needs and the good of others in the community".³ At any one point in time, a particular member might be contributing in a servant leadership role or for a triennium they might not have been asked to serve. But each and every one of us should be ready to serve if asked. This expectation should be communicated as early as aspirancy. While a person might not be asked to serve until after they've been clothed or professed, we should be sure that formation includes an understanding

³ OCDS Constitutions, Art. 6a

that vocation is more about giving than receiving. We can all easily name the many gifts that we receive from being a Secular Carmelite. But the real question is it that God has called us to GIVE through our vocation to Carmel. Sometimes what we are being called to give is service to our community. This is part of being a Carmelite. This is part of belonging to a community. So we need to be sure to include this expectation beginning early in formation and constantly remind each other that community does not happen without much work on the part of every single member.

The willingness to serve also needs to be part of the discernment process (especially at the time of making the Promise). Is the candidate willing to contribute to the life of the community, not just spiritually, but by being willing to help with the more practical administrative type things that are part of community life? “A person who wishes to be a member of the OCDS must be able to form community, be part of a group that is dedicated to a common goal, show interest in the other members, be supportive in the pursuit of a life of prayer and be able to receive the support of others.”⁴

I want to remind all of us that another sign of a good servant leader is the willingness to step down, to stay out of the way once one’s term of service is completed. There are those who complete their time in office but still want to be in charge and still want things to be done the way they did them. Letting those who are now charged with servant leadership do things their way and make their own mistakes can be difficult for those who have been in charge (especially if they’ve been in charge for many years). We must recognize that God can work through each and every one of us and that God is capable of working through those currently in servant leadership. There is this saying I have heard many times in recent years “in Carmel, sometimes you are in leadership and sometimes you’re not.” In our Order, there are no permanent

⁴ Draft Ratio Institutionis, Art. 27

appointments to any position of servant leadership. Even the Fr General gets elected anew every six years. Each of us has been given different gifts by God and sometimes the Order (or province, or community) needs the gifts that have been given to this person, and sometimes the Order (or province, or community) needs the gifts of another. New servant leaders bring new ideas and new viewpoints and new enthusiasm that can refresh and renew the life of a community. If we have the same people in servant leadership for too long, we run the risk of stagnation instead of growth.

No matter in what way anyone in the Order is called to contribute by way of servant leadership, the important thing that we need to keep in mind and to include in our formation programs and in developing leaders within our communities is that good leaders are always concerned about the good of the community. They help all the members to exercise the gifts that God has given them for the good of the community and the larger Church. Good leaders listen, trust, forgive, support, encourage, guide, are firm when necessary, and always act in love. Sometimes they may need to make difficult decisions. Sometimes they may have to tell someone something that person does not want to hear (like you don't have a vocation to the Secular Order), difficult as this may be. But they are important and necessary to the life of the Order.

I'd like to close my remarks with a paragraph from Jean Vanier's book "Community and Growth".

I discover more and more the marvelous way in which responsibility leads to spiritual growth. Of course it is a cross, and some people mope and groan under it.

Others see responsibility as something deserved which brings prestige and advantages.

But if we are aware of the gravity of responsibility and what it means to carry people, and if we accept the cross with all its implications, this is a marvelous way to grow.

But if we are to carry our cross lightly, with patience and wisdom, we have to cling to the Spirit of God. More than anyone else, we need time with our God.

Otherwise, we will lose peace, we will lose the light if we do not have time to listen.⁵

Various Leadership Positions within an OCDS Community

- Council – includes president, formation director and 3 councilors
- Formation team
- Secretary
- Treasurer
- Hospitality
- Infirmarian
- Librarian
- Liturgist
- Retreat Coordinator
- Newsletter editor
- Historian
- Webmaster
- Apostolate coordinator

Discussion Questions

What qualities should we look for in those we call forth to serve the community on the council?

How can we better handle changes in servant leadership? How does a newly elected council learn how to function as a council? How does the out-going council pass along to the new council any on-going business?

What are some ways we can call each person in the community to contribute to the functioning of the community? i.e. help with one of the roles listed above

Where in our formation programs do we address the topic of servant leadership? How can we work this topic into our formation programs?

⁵ Vanier, Jean “Community and Growth”, Paulist Press, New York, 1989, pg. 211.

