

OCDS Study Guide for
“Community and Growth”
by Jean Vanier

One of our canonical communities has begun the study of “Community and Growth” for their on-going formation. They have agreed to provide their monthly reflection questions towards creating a study guide for the book. This file will be updated each month as we receive those reflection questions.

Chapter 1

1) Throughout our life we receive call... Reflect over your life paying particular attention to what attracted you to Carmel. Share with the community your path to Carmel.

2) “You did not choose me. No, I chose you, and I commissioned you to go out and to bear fruit, fruit that will last; and then the Father will give you anything you ask Him in my name. What I command you is to love one another.” John 15: 16-17

“You called me by name, you cried aloud to me, and your voice pierced my deafness.”
The Confessions, Book X, Chapter 27

Life is a call to “be”. It’s a call to forget separated self, and to become totally lost in our God. Our focus must shift from what we get out of life to offering ourselves as a gift to our lover. How does this relate to your call to Carmel?

3) The call we receive requires commitment and consecration. But every commitment has a price to pay, and the price is high... our very self! “It is the promise that you makes you members of the Secular Order... Your promise has been recognized by the Church.” (The Beatitudes as Integral Part of the Promise - page 1) It is the promise that incorporates you into the order and into community. Since we do not live in community, it is your structure to make community...i.e. to make a community of the people who share something very basic about your Catholic Christian...namely Carmel. But to make community, we must understand community...”Community is a place of belonging, a place where people are earthed and find their identity.” (Community and Growth, Chapter 1, page 13)

Reflect on your identity in Carmel...share your identity in Carmel with us.

4) Since as Secular Carmelites it is our responsibility to make community, how do we make community? Review Chapter 1 for ways to make community and share these in depth with the community.

5) “My people is my community, made up of those who know me and carry me. They are a springboard towards all humanity. I cannot be a universal brother or sister unless I first love my people.” (Community and Growth, Chapter 1 page 17) Carmel is the place of belonging... i.e. where my brother and sisters support me, encourage me - liberate me

to die to destructive egoism - to be born in love. This is the goal of a Carmelite community. Reflect on this... then share from your own life experiences and ways this comes about in community.

6) "In community, people are called always to become more" (Community and Growth -Chapter 1, page 23)...that is to live in the Teresian Way. In what ways has our Carmelite community given you the gift of calling you forth to become more?

7) "there is always warfare in our hearts; there is always the struggle between pride and humility, hatred and love, forgiveness and the refusal to forgive, truth and the concealment of truth, openness and closedness. Each one of us is walking in that passage towards liberation, growing on the journey towards wholeness and healing." (Community and Growth - Chapter 1, page 28) Share how Teresa of Avila addresses this for us in Carmel.

8) "God seems pleased to call together in Christian communities people who, humanly speaking, are very different, who come from very different cultures, classes and countries. The most beautiful communities are created from just this diversity of people and temperaments. This means that each person must love the others with all their differences, and work with them for the community.....'By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another'" (Community and Growth - Chapter 1, page 45)

How can we in Carmel be of service to one another? How did Therese do this? How can I better love and serve my brothers and sisters in Carmel and in Christ? Review Community and Growth - Chapter 1, pages 45-47.

Chapter 2

1) Using the backdrop of the Constitutions, reflect on your life in Carmel according to:

"But between the initial call to community and the final rooting, there are many passages, moments of doubt and crises of all sorts. The final rooting is the recognition and acceptance of a covenant, a bonding between people that is holy and sacred because it is given by God. And this covenant between people is founded on the bonding or the covenant between the individual person and God"

i.e. God has a purpose for calling us to this vocation!

Share how your formation program through the various stages (aspirancy, formation for First Promise, formation for Definitive Promise) assisted you in your discerning to become a professed Carmelite Secular (if possible, give specific examples).

2)

"It is only when you discover you are loved by God and by others, and that you can do beautiful things for others, that you begin to get in touch with what is deepest in you" (pg 62)

Reflect back over your life in Carmel and give examples from the different passages/stages of your growth in love of God and others and how your individual apostolate emerged as fruit from your response to an aspiration/call.

3)

"But the communities whose members live faithfully a life-long covenant with God...are signs of fidelity." (pg 63)

Carmel is a community of tenderness and fidelity. Embracing this final rooting in community (our definitive promise), I enter into covenant with God and my sisters and brothers in Carmel. This covenant calls me in my love of God and my sisters and brothers to tenderness and faithfulness. Share how you as a viable member of community are tender to each member (community as sharing) and faithful...which is to live a beatitudinal life (see pages 55-60 and also Fr Deeney's talk on Beatitudes).

- 4) My promise calls me to be a sign of hope and resurrection. The question is how do I fit my life into Christ - not how do I fit Christ into my life as a Carmelite Secular. How am I doing in the setting of my priorities? looking at the areas of God, spouse, family, Carmel, parish, work, civic involvements?
Out of this grows the fruit of my individual apostolate and community apostolate.
- 5) How does my vocation to a particular state of life fit with my OCDS commitment? How do each support the other? What challenges do I have in living OCDS in my current state of life?
- 6) Do I find my community is where I want to be rooted for the rest of my life? Do I feel the same about the larger Order? Can I still be rooted in the Order if I move from this community?

Chapter 3

- 1) What is "mission" in general...its universal calling? What was Jesus' mission?
- 2) What is a community mission, specifically OCDS? what is the mission of this OCDS community? its goals? How does this mission compare with Jesus' mission? with the mission of the Church? with the Order's mission?
- 3) What is your personal mission in the Church community? in the OCDS community?
- 4) Why do you come to Carmel?
- 5) What exposures does the community have regarding its mission? e.g. personal commitments, self-fulfillment, cooperation between members. Is this community fulfilling the commitment for members toward becoming instruments of Christ and His Church or is it just another elite group isolated from the community at large in the Body of Christ?
- 6) How does this community give life to others? both within the community but especially to those outside the community?

Chapter 4

This chapter can be discussed from several perspectives: our relationship with God as community; our relationship with others as community; our particular OCDS Community; and the Church as community. One can use the questions below without the commentary as a study guide or use both together to stimulate discussion.

1. How does this chapter apply to our personal relationship with God, the Blessed Trinity?

On p. 133 Vanier states: “Growth in love is a growth in the Spirit. The stages through which we must pass in order to grow in love are the stages through which we must pass to become more totally united to God... But true growth comes from God, when we cry out to Him from the depths of the abyss to let his Spirit penetrate us.” **What are the similarities between the stages the soul passes through toward union with God and the stages a Community passes through?**

A new-found relationship with God brings with it a great enthusiasm and easy ability to sacrifice. The heart is enflamed as God holds our soul as an infant in its mother’s arms. As Vanier points out on p. 122, “People can generally only become conscious of their limitation if at the same time they are given the strength to overcome these by being helped to discover their own capacities for love, goodness and positive action, and to regain confidence in themselves and the Holy Spirit. People cannot accept their own fears if they do not at the same time feel loved, respected and trusted. They cannot overcome their difficulties and inner darkness if they have not been helped to discover that they are lovable.”

In the section on Tensions and Anguish, Vanier states that growth is impossible without tension, without suffering. God’s light and truth penetrate the soul and cause it anguish. P. 131: when we are at peace, when we have accepted our own deep wounds and weaknesses, when we are in touch with our heart and our capacity for tenderness, then our actions flow from our true selves and become a source of growth.

2. Our relationship with others. As professed members, we made a promise to live according to the beatitudes and the Gospel of Jesus Christ. How does our relationship with others act as a barometer for our Carmelite vocation?

On p. 134 Vanier draws from St. Paul’s letter to the Corinthians (ch. 13) and his letter to the Galatians (ch. 5) to describe the measures of love: “Love is being patient, rendering service, not being jealous or proud, not bragging all the time about oneself and exaggerating one’s own qualities. Love is doing nothing which bruises others; it is putting the interests of others above our own. It is not being irritable, bitter, aggressive, or searching for the evil in others; it is not rejoicing in injustice but seeking the truth in all things....growth in love is growth in joy and patience, goodness, generosity, fidelity, tenderness and self-control. It is the opposite of all our tendencies to division – hatred, quarrelling, jealousy, rage, disputes, dissension, schism, desire and of all those dark tendencies which lead us to fornication, impurity, debauchery, idolatry, witchcraft, orgies and gluttony.... Perhaps the essential quality for anyone who lives in community is patience.”

On p. 136 Vanier says we all live more or less on illusions which protect our vulnerability. On p. 140 he states, “We all carry our own deep wound, which is the wound of our loneliness.” He goes on to say, “We have to realise that this wound is inherent in the human condition and that what we have to do is to walk with it instead of fleeing from it. We cannot accept it until we discover that we are loved by God just as we are, and that the Holy Spirit, in a mysterious way, is living at the center of the wound.” In order to lose our illusion about ourselves, we need relationship with others. Children are very good at mirroring truth to us.

3. The OCDS Community to which you made your promise. What stage of growth is it in? Why? How does it relate to the whole Carmelite Community?

See pages 149-152. Vanier states, "But when a community has enough members to do all the work, when it has enough material goods, it can relax. It has strong structures. It is fairly secure. It's then that there is danger!"

4. What is the role of Carmel in the Church? How do we fit into this wider Community?

See pp. 149 and beyond to end of Chapter 4. On p. 150 Vanier states, "Each community must recognize its own focus of fidelity, its own essential vision. If it loses sight of this focal point, it will regress, because the foundation on which it was built has crumbled."

What is the essential vision of Carmel? Has it maintained the spirit of its original founders, St. Teresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross? Do you view contemplative prayer itself as an apostolate?

On p. 155 Vanier says, "Men and women of prayer, hidden in monasteries and hermitages, sometimes living in great pain, are like hidden pumps irrigating dry land." And on p. 156, "There is a mystery in the secret strength of those whose bodies are broken, who seem to do nothing all day, but who remain in the presence of God. Their immobility obliges them to keep their minds and hearts fixed on the essential, on the source of life itself. Their suffering and agony bears fruit; they give life."

Chapter 5

A community reflects the people who make it up. It has energy founded on hope, but there is also weariness, a search for security and a fear of evolving toward maturity of love and responsibility: it often reflects our fear of dying to our personal instincts...people and community needs nourishment in order to live the values of the gospel.

Q1. as members of OCDS, are we able to die to our personal instincts...are able to practice detachment for self-knowledge that benefits the community?

Q2. how is one nourished in community? Is it in the life of the Spirit, that gives energy to self and community, or is it for a personal agenda, e.g. just for self spiritual growth and practice.

Communities need wisdom to discern the nourishment they need in order to become truly alive in the Spirit. Because of our personal richness and complexity, we all need different kinds of nourishment. We are nourished by our encounter with God and others expressly in community.

In any case, we need to go beyond our own resources, get out of our own box and look out toward community.

Q3. What gifts, that I have, am I sharing in community to further the Spirit? Or am I just sitting back letting others contribute to and further the Carmelite spirit in community life. Have I entered into the collective conscience of the OCDS community by surrendering my own gift and put it decisively at the community's service?

Q4. Am I discerning my place on Carmelite spirituality in the spirit of detachment (Q1)? How is this discernment aiding the community?

Vanier writes that we need "daily manna" in order to maintain fidelity to our covenant, in our case, fidelity to the daily round of the Carmelite vocation, even though they may be "small things." (Ex. St. Therese of Lisieux and Bro. Lawrence). This is in our daily life wherein we can discover in a present moment the presence of God in small things.

Q5. In imitation of our saints above, how do I manage the small things as moments in God's presence?

Q6. Do I recognize moments of grace in community that perhaps renew our hearts and give us peace?

We must be attentive to these moments of peace which renew us and create in us a desire to be close to Jesus and to those in community, which call us to greater fidelity. We must be attentive to others, to notice in them the presence of the Holy Spirit.

Q7. How am I doing in my attention to others in this regard in my community and in the larger Carmelite community? How do I see the Spirit at work in community?

Q8. Do I feel a responsibility for the atmosphere of the community with my trust and love, or do I present sadness and all sorts of criticism?

People need an intellectual understanding of the significance of their community. They need a clear reminder of the meaning and place of the community in today's world and in the history of salvation.

Q9. Does your community provide such understanding and meaning? How? If not, then how could OCDS provide understanding and meaning?

Intellectual discipline is important for human growth and earthing in community life.

Q10. Has one's community provided formation/on-going-formation help to reflect and to be grounded more deeply in the certitudes of faith and human thought?

Q11. As a part of intellectual discipline, how am I doing about studying and applying the OCDS Constitution and local statutes in my OCDS experience when possible?

We all have to find our own rhythm of prayer. Times of solitude do not separate me from others; it helps me to love them more tenderly, realistically and attentively. I find my true-self in solitude realistically in relation with others. To grow in human ways and inner freedom, we need both sharing and communal prayer, and solitude, reflection, inwardness, and personal prayer.

Q12. Does the Carmelite tradition of prayer and discipline suggested in its rules provide guidelines for pursuing the means for a rhythm of prayer?

Q13. Should there be prayer experience sharing within the community or should this be held personal?

Vanier points to the importance of the Eucharist in community life.

Q14. Should communities celebrate "spiritual communion" in lieu of the Eucharist? Would this be an acceptable way to be gathered in communion with one another offering themselves to the Trinity, so that the whole community may be a place of the presence of the Kingdom on this earth?

Chapter 6

1. How does the council of my community support and nurture the gifts of all the members of the community?

2. Vanier says that the leaders of a community are to support the growth of its members. Art. 46 of the Constitutions says "The primary responsibility of the Council is the formation and Christian and Carmelite maturing of the members of the community." How do these two ideas fit together? How does the Local Council and other leadership in

the community support the growth of members in the Carmelite charism? Does the Local Council approach its duties with this mindset or do they approach them from a more manipulative, power focused mindset?

3. Vanier says that leaders need to organize the community, animate it, and love each person in it. In order to do so, they need to keep the goal or objective of the community in mind in order to love it and live it. What is the goal of Carmelite community? How do we keep that as our focus when making community decisions?

4. What are my own views of authority? How willing am I to serve in a position of authority? Do I view positions of authority in our community as a way of service both to the community and to God? How does leadership as service differ from leadership being a position of prestige and advantages? Which of those ways of viewing leadership do I see in myself? Which do I see in the way my Local Council functions?

5. Vanier reminds us that God chose leaders who were broken: Moses, Peter, Paul. Do I see myself as unworthy of being called to leadership or do I recognize that my own brokenness might be the gift needed to serve the community at this time?

6. How does the Local Council keep the community focused on the essentials of Carmelite life while creating an atmosphere of mutual love, confidence, sharing, peace and joy among the members? How do I do both of those things?

7. At election time, how does my community choose its council? What do I look for in a council member? Do I vote based on popularity or do I vote based on leadership skills? Do I base my vote on whether I think a person will serve the community well or because I am good friends with that person?

8. Do I know how to share responsibility with others? Or do I step in to do it all myself because its quicker and easier and I might do it better than another? How well to the members of the Local Council share responsibility with each other and with the larger community? Do they know how to delegate things so as to develop and call upon the gifts of every member of the community?

9. How well do the leaders in the community accept the vision of the other members of the community? Do they reflect community goals or their own goals? If I am a leader in my community, who's goals do I focus on? How willing am I to step down from authority when the time comes? How willing am I to let go of my own goals to implement to goals of the community?

10. How familiar am I with the legislation of the Order (Rule of St Albert, Constitutions, Provincial Statutes)? Do I regularly review these with an eye towards how well I am living out the commitment which the legislation calls me to? Am I familiar enough with them to know where to look for guidance when faced with a question of community life? Does the Local Council regularly refer to the OCDS legislation when discernment decisions related to community life?

11. How well do the leaders of my community (or myself if I am one of those leaders) listen to all the members of the community? How do they seek out the input of the quietest, least vocal of the members? Do they truly listen to the community and are they open to the ideas coming from the community or only their own ideas?
12. If I am a leader, who is the person that keeps me grounded? Who makes sure I don't let things go to my head? Who is my "personal prophet" reminding of me what is truly essential and speaking truth to me that others may not want to say?
13. How does my community support and form people for leadership roles? Do the same people keep getting elected to the council or is there a sense of many in the community having the gifts needed to serve on council? How do we foster leadership skills in all our members? Is this included in some way in our formation program?
14. What are my own expectations of those in leadership? Do I feel free to bring my concerns to them? Do I remember to feel compassion towards them even when I disagree with their decisions? Do I idealize those in leadership or do I recognize that they too have both strengths and weaknesses?
15. Read again the last article of the Rule of St Albert.

Chapter 7

1. Chapter 7 speaks of other gifts in community. As you reflect upon community what are some important gifts that a community might need to be a healthy community?
2. As Carmelites we are asked to seek the guidance of a spiritual director. Why do you think it is important to get a compatible spiritual guide?
3. "Teresa of Avila insisted on spiritual guides being truly wise theologians." Can you share a time when the wisdom of a spiritual guide might have helped in a difficult position in your spiritual life?
4. "We have to learn to draw on our sufferings, distress and setbacks so can grow spiritually." How does this fit into the Carmelite way of life?
5. Take a few moments to reflect and share you insights on the many gifts of the community. How do your own personal gifts add to your Carmelite community? This is "so we participate in each other's gifts and help each other build community."
6. How does our Carmelite promise of obedience play an active role in our personal communities? The idea of obedience falls under the gift of availability.

7. “The most precious gift in community is rooted in weakness. It is when we are frail and poor that we need others, that we call them to love and see their gifts.” Discuss what this means.
8. “It is good to recognize, encourage and affirm gifts.” Take time to go around and affirm someone in your community. It helps to strengthen the community.