

## **Discerning a Vocation to Carmel: the Council's Role**

originally written by the Cedar Rapids Council

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***This is an example only. Please adapt to local needs.***

One of the responsibilities of the community Council is “to admit candidates to formation, the Promises, and the Vows” (OCDS Constitutions, No. 47 a). The Council recognizes that this responsibility entails collaborating with the person in discerning whether God is calling him or her to the vocation of the Secular Carmelite or to another vocation entirely.

The first discernment, of course, rests in the Council's decision even to invite someone to attend a meeting.

In some communities, members of the Council meet with an interested person two or three times to explain a little of what Carmel is but mostly to listen. They try to see whether or not that person seems called to a life of prayer and study in community.

The interviewers are primarily listening for the expression of a desire to grow in an intimate relationship with Christ and His Church, as well as an interest in Carmelite spirituality. In the back of their minds, the interviewers are also wondering what this person might bring to the community.

It is wise to keep an eye open for red flags. Will this person be a distraction to the unity of the community even in the context of a few visits? Is the person emotionally balanced? Does he/she have an agenda and the desire to impose it on the community? It's not common, but it does happen.

Other communities invite interested persons to “come and see” after only a brief screening to find out if the person is eligible – a Catholic in good standing who wants to learn more about prayer and seems like a normal person. Further screening is made at the person's first few visits to the community meetings. Screening includes seeing how the person responds to the experience of the meetings. They get a feel for how the person interacts with others. They explain the basics of the OCDS life in general terms and see if the person feels drawn to it and is interested in learning more. These communities use the aspirancy period as the time to “discern out” persons who are called to another path to holiness.

Aspirants are discerning whether Carmel, as made visible by this community, is what they are being called to. At the same time, the Council is deciding whether this person should be invited to enter Formation I (clothing).

Faithful attendance at the meetings is one indicator. If other involvements, however good, often take precedence perhaps this person will not be able to make Carmel a priority. It could be that they have responsibilities that do not allow them to follow the vocation at this time, but might come back in the future.

Is this person teachable? Does he/she enjoy and appreciate what he/she is learning? How does the person respond to correction? Is the person growing in trust and willingness to be transparent with his/her formator?

Does the person integrate into the community? Is there willingness to spend time with the community? Does he or she try to monopolize discussions? Does he or she seem to have as a frame of reference the charisms of other orders or movements?

Finally, but very importantly, the Council seeks to understand the attitude of the person's family to this call. If there is resistance, the Council may advise the person to take more time. For married persons, Carmelite life should enhance the vocation to marriage, not compete with it.

While discernment for entering Formation I (clothing) focuses on the person's call to Carmel, discernment for First Promise focuses on the person's living out of that call. By the time the person applies for the Promise, the Council should be able to see that the person has integrated mental prayer, the liturgy of the hours, and frequent Mass into daily life. There should be a better understanding of Mary as companion and model of discipleship, good attendance and participation in community life, and interest in the apostolate – sharing the Carmelite charism with those outside the Order. The Council doesn't look for perfection by any means, but looks for the person's determination and perseverance to make these elements part of his/her life.

Most persons join with an eye to what the community offers them, but after experiencing the life of Carmel they normally develop a desire to give back to the community. It is a red flag when this transition is lacking, and the Council should pay attention.

Because some people are better at expressing themselves in writing and others are better at verbal communication, most communities combine the two when discerning for the Promise. In the written request, the person responds to a set of questions about the person's call to Carmel, practice of prayer, integration of Carmelite responsibilities into the person's life and so on. The letter is followed up with an in-person interview get a more complete picture of the person's readiness.

It should be noted that while there are standard questions in common use among communities, there is no reason that a local Council may not come up with their own questions, or adapt questions for a particular individual.

Discerning a person's readiness for admission to clothing or the Promise is an awesome responsibility. We can be grateful that the road to the Definitive Promise is long and gradual, with many opportunities for both the candidate and the Council to evaluate whether God is calling him/her to this Carmelite Secular life. The Council relies on common sense, prayer, and especially the guidance of the Holy Spirit in discerning whether to accept a person to continue formation. It is the Council's responsibility to recognize and confirm an authentic vocation to Carmel and invite the person to respond to that call.