

The Spirit of Formation

by Mary Bellman, OCDS

In thinking about the spirit of formation I'd like to borrow a quote from T.S. Elliott: "*We shall not cease from exploration, and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time.*"¹

The journey of formation is certainly an experience of *personal* exploration. It's one that requires a balanced approach and a clear plan. Legislation and guidelines are necessary, but if they're *all* we focus on, it's possible to become overwhelmed by the details and lose sight of our destination. How many of you while following directions got so focused on making the right turns that you forgot where you were going?

Or imagine trying to put a puzzle together without knowing what it's supposed to look like at the end. You wouldn't have a clue how the pieces relate to one another and before long you'd probably like to throw the whole thing out the window. Think of this as an attempt to describe the outside of the formation puzzle box.

So, what *is* on the outside? I'd like to propose the following 4-part image. Formation is information plus environment and the faithful practice of prayer that lead to the gradual transformation of the person.

Each of these pieces (Information, Environment, Prayer, and Transformation) are necessary parts of the picture. Without even one, the image is incomplete. They each build upon and complement one another. Ideally, they should enable the person to live out and share the Carmelite Charism.

Information

As we all know, the study of information is a necessary and important part of the process of formation.

Study, as stated in *Vita Consecrata*, "is an expression of the unquenchable desire for an ever-deeper knowledge of God, the source of light and all human truth."² Everyone in our

¹ T.S. Eliot, Anne Hodgson, and Philip Mairet. *Little Gidding*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1942).

² John Paul II, Pope. *The Consecrated Life: Vita Consecrata: Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation of the Holy Father John Paul II to the Bishops and Clergy, Religious Orders and Congregations, Societies of Apostolic Life, Secular Institutes and All the Faithful On the Consecrated Life and Its Mission in the Church and in the World*, (Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1996), #98.

communities should have this desire for a deeper knowledge of God and our formation sessions (at every level) should be a response to this desire.

We can't form someone in the Carmelite Charism without a program of study. It's the basic structure around which we plan our formation sessions and how we plan for when clothings and promises will happen.

Obviously, there are certain things we must read and learn. But what information we choose to pass on is really the easiest part of the picture isn't it? The various books are already conveniently laid out for us in our Provincial formation guidelines. We already know that in the various stages of formation, candidates will read certain Carmelite works. In no way do I slight the importance of reading when I say that it isn't *all there is* to forming someone in the Charism.

The following part of the picture, environment, is an equally important but often overlooked part of formation.

Environment

Whether we realize it or not, we are also formed by the influence of people around us and in our communities for better *or* for worse. St. Teresa of Avila speaks of this so often throughout her writings. In her early years she tells us of how, in speaking with other young people she "listened to accounts of their affections and of childish things not the least bit edifying; and, what was worse, I exposed my soul to that which caused all its harm."³

That's a very powerful statement coming from Teresa. She also says that it frightened her "sometimes to think of the harm a bad companion can do, and if I hadn't experienced it I wouldn't believe it."⁴

She also had good influences in her life which helped her greatly. One Father from the Society of Jesus was especially helpful to her. Teresa said, "In all that he said it seemed to me, according to what was impressed upon my soul, that the Holy Spirit was speaking through him in order to heal me."⁵ "From such experience I understand the great profit that comes from good companionship."⁶ How many of us can relate to her experience?

In addition to people, events in our daily lives *also* form us. How many of you have had an experience in your life that deeply impacted you such as joining the Order, meeting your spouse,

³ St. Teresa of Avila, translated by Kieran Kavanaugh, and Otilio Rodriguez. *The collected works of St. Teresa of Avila. Volume 1, The Book of Her Life, Ch2, Para 2.* (Washington (D.C.): Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1987).

⁴ Teresa, *Life*, Ch2, Para 4.

⁵ Teresa, *Life*, Ch 24, Para 16.

⁶ Teresa, *Life*, Ch 2, Para 5.

having a child, or receiving a cancer diagnosis? *Did that not change* your prayer life, what you read, and the way you interacted with others?

In our communities we must be good companions of one another. A person's community may be the only positive and encouraging influence in their lives. It is our responsibility to provide members with an environment that encourages their continual growth and transformation. Serious thought and consideration should always be given to how we spend our time together each month as a Carmelite community.

What's the environment of your community like? If someone were to visit your community for a day, what would they have to say? How do you treat one another? It's often said that people will forget your name, but they will always remember how you made them *feel*. Are we being the good influences in one another's lives? Is our community a nurturing place? Are we good examples of the Carmelite vocation to one another?

We cannot expect a person to learn what it means to be a Carmelite by *only* having them read John of the Cross or Teresa of Avila. I cannot stress enough that *no amount of reading* will make someone a Carmelite. That is why our time spent together in community and in conversation with one another is so important in formation. It's the example and interaction of members in the community that often speaks the loudest to someone. As stated in *Vita Consecrata*, we must realize that the "...chief instrument of formation is personal dialogue..."⁷

To reiterate, what it means to be a Carmelite is passed on by interaction and example in addition to information. That's why attendance at meetings is so important. Our goal is not to produce scholars of Carmelite literature, but Carmelites who continue to seek the face of God. There is a *huge difference* between the two.

If problems develop within your formation program, don't forget to look at the community atmosphere. What are your gatherings like? Is the environment hospitable, encouraging, and open? Are people able to freely express their ideas, questions, and concerns? Are the formation sessions fostering or stifling growth? Do we honor the unique spiritual journey of each individual or do we try to force them into a mold of our own making? These are things we cannot lose sight of in the formation of our members.

No community is perfect of course; but we try to do our best. St. John of the Cross reminds us: "Keep yourself from setting your thoughts upon what happens in the community, and still more from speaking of it *except to the proper person at the proper time...* For if you want to ponder on

⁷ John Paul II. #66.

all that happens you would always discover something amiss even if you lived among angels.”⁸ How true that statement is; but we do the best that we can.

A word of caution though; in thinking about formation, we must be careful not to leave out the next part of the picture; the role of personal prayer. As stated in *Vita Consecrata*, “the urgent need for appropriate and necessary training can turn into a frantic quest for efficiency, as if” it all “depended primarily on human means rather than on God.”⁹ Therefore, the role of prayer in formation cannot be neglected.

Fostered by Prayer: The Story of Elijah

To look at the role of prayer I’d like to use a metaphor that occurred to me one day while doing some reading on Elijah. I love the story of Elijah and its imagery. It speaks so much to me about the spirit of Carmel, formation and prayer. We don’t know much about Elijah’s origins from scripture, but we can still use his example for inspiration.

After his announcement of the drought God commands Elijah to go to the brook Cherith and there hide himself. Elijah spends his days and nights waiting by the lonely stream in the desert. *He was not told* when God would give him further instructions. He is simply left there *alone* in a state of total dependence on God. As Adrienne Von Speyer wrote “Taken as a whole, Elijah’s public life is one single act of being there.”¹⁰

Elijah learned and practiced total reliance on God by *staying near that stream* which provided him with water. But God knew that Elijah would need food as well, so he sent ravens to him twice a day with something to eat. Through this experience Elijah was *most certainly being formed* for his mission. There was no room for pretense or ego here. In his situation Elijah *would die* if God did not provide for him.

Let’s try to apply the figures and symbols in this story to our own lives and *specifically* to the process of formation.

- We have Elijah as the person in formation.
- Think of the water flowing through the stream as the connection to God through a life of prayer.

⁸ St. John of the Cross, translated by Kieran Kavanaugh, and Otilio Rodriguez. *The collected works of St. John of the Cross, Precautions*, (Washington (D.C.): Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1991). #3

⁹ John Paul II. #38.

¹⁰ Adrienne Von Speyer. *Elijah*, translated by Brian McNeil, C.R.V., (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990), p.8.

- Think of the ravens bringing nourishment as formators. (I apologize to you formators but remember ravens are highly intelligent!)

We must realize in this picture, that of primary importance *is the stream*. You'll die *a lot faster* without water than without food, especially in the desert. In addition to instruction (*the food the formators bring*), we must be sure that those under our care know how important the life of prayer is (*the stream*). Without this, *all the reading and meetings in the world will do them little good*.

In prayer we come to know our dependence on God and we grow in virtue which enables us to truly see ourselves and one another. As Fr. Mark O'Keefe pointed out "Without prayer and prayerful self-reflection, we remain ignorant of who and what we truly are."¹¹

It's very hard to form a person who has no idea who they are. According to Thomas Merton "Every man has a vocation to be someone: but he must understand clearly, that in order to fulfill this vocation he can only be one person: himself."¹²

Formation requires honesty and openness on the part of the person being formed. They must have the capacity to commit to journeying with the Lord *and* with the community. You can't choose only one companion. Both God *and* the community must be with the person as they make the journey.

Formation is a time of conversion. We must have the capacity for self-reflection and accepting feedback. Until a person at least becomes willing to take an honest look inside, much of what they read can bounce off or not sink in.

We've all experienced how re-reading the Carmelite Saints is different every time. At different places in our lives we've come to know ourselves better and the words take on a deeper meaning. This change is due in part to our continuous formation through prayer which is a *fundamental part* of the Carmelite Charism.

As Fr. Deeney states: "This interest in learning to meditate or inclination to meditate is fundamentally characteristic of any Secular Carmelite. It is perhaps the most basic."¹³ He also states that "Carmel has a mission. Carmel's mission is that we know God so that God may be known."¹⁴ Let's do our best to make sure those in formation, and we ourselves, *never forget* how important prayer is.

¹¹ Mark O'Keefe, *The Way of Transformation: Saint Teresa of Avila on the Foundation and Fruit of Prayer*, (Washington (D.C.): Institute of Carmelite Studies, 2016), p.37.

¹² Thomas Merton, *No Man is an Island*, (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978) p.133.

¹³ Aloysius Deeney, *Welcome to the Secular Order of Discalced Carmelites*, (Washington (D.C.): Institute of Carmelite Studies, 2009) p.115.

¹⁴ Deeney, p. 18.

Teresa of Avila teaches us that prayer is transformative. “Well, let us speak now of those who are beginning to be servants of love. This doesn't seem to me to mean anything else than to follow resolutely by means of this path of prayer Him who has loved us so much.”¹⁵

Our goal in all of this...the passing on of good information, providing an encouraging environment, and in fostering prayer, is in some way to help prepare the path for the transformation of the person. Our great Carmelite Saints were truly transformed people and we can see just how effectively they passed on the Charism.

Transformation of the Person

The path to transformation is unique to each person and there's little I can say here only that I am still on the way myself. Ultimately, *only the grace of God* can transform hearts, and this is driven by a committed life of prayer. Transformation is a life long journey that reaches into every part of us.

As stated in *Vita Consecrata* “Formation should involve the whole person, in every aspect of the personality, in behavior and intentions. Precisely because it aims at the transformation of the whole person, it is clear that the commitment to formation never ends.”¹⁶

Transformation is difficult, but there is always hope for us. Fr. Deeney reminds us that “It is impossible to live a life of prayer, meditation, and study without changing.”¹⁷ Thanks be to God. May God give us the grace to never pause for too long on our own journeys and the grace to be of service to those travelling with us.

The desire to be of service to others is a natural result of our continual transformation. “The more profoundly one is immersed in God, so much the more is one obliged to go out of self, that is to go toward the world, to bear into it the divine life.”¹⁸

To be of service to those in formation is a serious responsibility and requires perseverance and prayer. “At no stage of life can people feel so secure and committed that they do not need to give careful attention to ensuring perseverance in faithfulness; just as there is no age at which a person has completely achieved maturity.”¹⁹

¹⁵ Teresa, *Life*, Ch 11, Para 1.

¹⁶ John Paul II. #65.

¹⁷ Deeney, p. 18.

¹⁸ John Sullivan, *Holiness Befits Your House: Canonization of Edith Stein: A Documentation*, (Washington (D.C.): Institute of Carmelite Studies, 2000).p. 15

¹⁹ John Paul II. #69.

“Formation then is a sharing in the work of the Father who, through the Spirit, fashions the inner attitudes of the Son in the hearts of young men and women.” Therefore, “those in charge of formation must be very familiar with the path of seeking God, so as to be able to accompany others on this journey.”²⁰

In looking for potential formators you should be looking for people of prayer and humility. If someone is shy or reluctant to lead, I wonder what kind of mental picture of a formator they have? Do they understand that they don't need to be great scholars or perfect Carmelites? Remind formators that the Holy Spirit will provide for them *if* they leave room for Him. All they need to do is their best and He will take care of the rest.

Formators don't have to be perfect. A good dose of humility and humor will go a long way. *It's ok to make mistakes.* As Teresa of Avila points out "Here, my daughters, is where love is to be seen: not hidden in corners but in the midst of the occasions of falling. And believe me that even though there may be more faults, and even some slight losses, our gain will be incomparably greater."²¹

I can personally say that I've never learned so much about myself until I became a formator and especially later as President. There's no doubt in my mind about how the grace of God provides as long as you let Him lead. We shouldn't forget that "...what is required of each individual is not success, but faithfulness."²²

And don't forget the three virtues Teresa always emphasizes as foundational to growth in prayer: Love of Neighbor, Detachment, and Humility.²³ They are important for everyone but a formator should especially keep them in mind.

To close I'd like to rephrase the words of T.S. Elliot that we began with. We shall not cease from *formation* and the end of all our formation will be to arrive where we started and know *ourselves* for the first time.

²⁰ John Paul II. #66.

²¹ St. Teresa of Avila, translated by Kieran Kavanaugh, and Otilio Rodriguez. *The collected works of St. Teresa of Avila. Volume 3, The Book of Her Foundations, Ch5, Para 15.* (Washington (D.C.): Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1985).

²² John Paul II. #63.

²³ St. Teresa of Avila, translated by Kieran Kavanaugh, and Otilio Rodriguez. *The collected works of St. Teresa of Avila. Volume 2, Way of Perfection.* (Washington (D.C.): Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1980).