

Workshop On "The President"

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In the letter of St. Paul to the Ephesians we read "...live a life worthy of the calling you have received, with perfect humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another lovingly. Make every effort to preserve the unity which has the Spirit as its origin and peace as its binding force. There is but one body and one Spirit, just as there is but one hope given all of you by your call. There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all, and works through all, and is in all. Each of us has received God's favor in the measure in which Christ bestows it.

...It is he who gave apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers in roles of service for the faithful to build up the body of Christ ... Let us then, be children no longer ... let us profess the truth in love and grow to the full maturity of Christ the head. Through him the whole body grows, and with the proper functioning of the members joined firmly together by each supporting ligament, builds itself up in love." (Eph 4 1-6,11,14-16)

This quotation from the Bible could very easily be the perfect definition of what is expected of a member when he or she is asked to run for the office of President of an OCDS community.

We are reminded that all that we have, and all that we are is a gift from God, a gift which we are expected to share in the measure in which it was bestowed on us, for we can only give what we have received, and if we have received this vocation as a gift from God, it is only just that this same gift be shared to its fullest. Being asked to hold the office of President is not a call to be honored, it is a call to serve. Jesus Christ himself came to serve.

He told us that in serving others, we serve Him. In the Gospel of Mark (25.40), Jesus said "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." The disciple must imitate Jesus' example. That means, for the Christian, for the Carmelite, that the disciple serves everyone - other disciples, other people, everyone.

Article 37 of the Constitutions of the Secular Order tells us specifically what the role of the President is. The Article states:

"The President... should show fraternal service toward all the members of the Community, foster a spirit of Christian and Carmelite affability, being careful to avoid any demonstration of preference of some members over others; coordinate contacts with those members of the community who because of age, illness, distance or other reasons, are not able to attend meetings; aid the Master of Formation and Spiritual Assistant in carrying out their responsibilities by his support of them; in their absence, but only temporarily, he may take their place or designate another to do so from among those who have made definitive promises."

The emphasis again, is on "service". That is what it all boils down to. In our Interim Guidelines on Responsibilities of Office, which was published by the Canadian Secretariat in June of 1997 following the Workshop on Formation, there is quite a lengthy description of all the things a President should be aware of. As a matter of fact, there are six pages of suggestions which are very helpful, but basically it boils down to three things: "Service to all members of the community, understanding of situations and circumstances which can and do arise, and generosity of time."

Community is "family", or "extended family". One of Fr. Dominic's messages which always finds a place in my heart is that we are all workers, no matter what our occupation. It is the will of God that all of us spend our days in work. We find peace and holiness in work done for the love of God. No matter what our task in life, when we do it with a spirit of joy and honesty, we bring dignity to our labour. And so it is in our family of Carmel, if we do our task whether it be President, Councilor, Master of Formation, faithful member, if we do it with a spirit of joy, and to the best of our ability, then we bring dignity to the work we do.

We have heard it said so often that "Nothing happens by chance". It is God who has made the plans for us. St. Teresa tells us in chapter 18 of the Way of Perfection that since the Lord knows what each one is suited for, he gives to each person a proper task, one that he sees as appropriate for that person's soul for the service of the Lord himself and for the good of neighbour. And if you have done what you can to be prepared, do not fear that your effort will be lost. Perhaps, if we are being asked to run for President, there may be a necessary contribution which we can make to the community. It may be something which no-one else is able to give at that particular period ... so by turning down the nomination, or by not accepting to do the will of God, the whole community will miss out, and lose the opportunity to receive your contribution, no matter how small it may be. I sincerely believe that each one of us has been given certain tasks to complete in our lives, and if we do not complete those tasks, they will go undone. Are we willing to let something go undone which our God had already prepared for us? All our actions should be an act of glory to God. Jesus Christ said "Let your light thus shine in front of others so that seeing your good works, they will give praise to your Father who is in heaven." In doing what is asked of us our brothers and sisters in the community will see the light of Christ when they see us dying for them and when they see us serving them.

One of the main reasons why members have been afraid to accept the job of President is fear of public speaking. St. Teresa tells us in chapter 18 of the Way of Perfection not to be afraid for the first thing the Lord does, if they are weak, is to give them courage and make them unafraid. In December last year our community was very blest to have Fr. Provincial, Fr. Alfred Grech, OCD visit us. During his homily, he made two statements which hit very close to home in regard to this fear of public speaking. He said that "God can change any person", and that "God uses the weak in order that His glory may be manifested". If God has given us a task to perform, He will also give us the graces we need to perform this task.

Often we have heard those who are asked to run for this office say "I cannot do it" "I am not worthy" "There are others who could do a better job". Each one of us has so much to give ... each one of us has had experiences of God's love in our lives, experiences which can be used to help each other in the community. All that is expected of us in any office ... is to be willing tools in the hands of God. As we have heard Fr. Dominic say many times "Just say yes, and God will do the rest."

When nominating a member for President it is important to follow a few simple rules. First of all, it is definitely not a popularity contest. Second, it is necessary to take into consideration the job description which is in the "Building our Future" booklet:

"The President is the head of the community. He/she sets the tone of the community by being a good role model of fidelity to the Rule, the spirit and charism of the Order, by his/her dedication and commitment to the duties of the office of President, and is voted in because the members of the community have been able to identify these qualifying traits in the individual, and feel that the individual will be able to do a good job for the community."

We can see that there are some practical things to remember. Not everyone is suited for every job. St. Paul says in his letter to the Romans "For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of the faith that God has assigned. For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us." (Rom. 12.3-6) Our human body parts work together for the good of the body, where even the least important members are useful and necessary for the spiritual well being and growth of the body. Not everyone is called to be a head, or a hand, or a foot ... and yet, each part of the body has a necessary and important function. So too it is with the body of our community. Every single member in the community is important, whether in the job of President, Councilor, Secretary, Treasurer, Master of Formation or faithful member. It is important to be prudent and to use discretion when nominating a person for this position, and even though each member, being a Carmelite, has the virtues needed, not all may have the required skills to represent the community, and hence the Order. This is where we have to be careful. Not only is each member very trustworthy and capable, but it is important NOT to take away the actual vocation at hand. The vocation of being pray-ers is also a very important one, since this is what we are called to do in the realm of our vocation - this is after all the charism of our Order. In chapter 12 of

Way of Perfection, St. Teresa tells us that clearly, the humble will reflect on their lives and and consider how they have served the Lord in comparison with how the Lord ought to be served and the wonders the Lord performed in lowering himself so as to give us an example of humility. In chapter 17 she tells us to consider ourselves lucky to serve the servants of the Lord and to praise His Majesty because he brought us among them.

Our very vocation is a call to service. Brothers and sisters, whether or not we are called to a position of office let us accept the calling that is placed in front of us. If you are asked to run for office, remember that in his/her own way, each member has the capability of holding office, with the assurance that you have members of the community who are more than willing and able to work with you harmoniously to ensure the well being of the community. Just as our human body parts work together for the good of the body, where all members are useful and necessary to the whole body, so too, each member of the community is useful and necessary for the spiritual well being and growth of the community. Let us then each use his/her particular gifts for the growth of a strong and healthy community.

In my short experience in these few years serving as President, my advice to an incoming President is this - trust in the words of the prophet Micah (6.8) "To do what is right, to love goodness and to walk humbly with God." In other words, invite God to be your Partner. With God as your Partner, you will be able to be of help to each and every member of the community which you have been called to serve.