

Checklist for Incoming Presidents and Group Leaders

Introduction

Someone becoming the President of a Secular Carmelite Community or the Leader of a Secular Carmelite Group for the first time has two immediately available sources of information about what the job entails.

Firstly, there is her own experience in observing other Presidents in action, in her own Community or Group and perhaps in another group. That is immensely valuable in showing the range of tasks that a President undertakes and the spirit in which they should be carried out. But, even in the best of circumstances, such experience is limited to what has been observed, and the full scope of what a President does and the rationale behind it will not be obvious to an outside observer.

Secondly, there are the OCDS *Constitutions*, which describe the nature of Carmelite spirituality and the circumstances in which Secular Carmelite communities operate. In Chapter VII, “Organization and Government” and in the *Local Statutes*, there are also some paragraphs which refer to administrative matters and specifically to the role of the President. For the whole Order, these are rather less helpful than might be expected, because circumstances have moved on since the *Constitutions* were approved in 2003. A new Chapter III-B “Fraternal Communion” was added in 2014, and the implications for the operation of Communities were drawn out in the annual letters from the Superior-General to the OCDS from 2016 onwards.

In England and Wales the *Constitutions* are an even less adequate handbook for Presidents of Communities, because the circumstances envisaged there are at variance with the situation on the ground. The most important difference is probably that the *Constitutions* assume that a Community will be of a *minimum* size of ten active members, implying an average size of considerably more, whereas the average size in England is much smaller.¹ A second significant difference is that, instead of each Community having its own Spiritual Assistant, there are none at all in England (with the Provincial Delegate for the OCDS being the universal Spiritual Assistant). There are advantages as well as disadvantages to the English situation, but it does imply a range of differences in the day-to-day running of communities. Moreover, whereas most countries have extensive Local Statutes – twenty pages or more – which fill in the detail of how communities should operate, the English Local Statutes are a bare minimum of less than four pages. That is entirely within the English tradition of operating by custom and precedent rather than by bureaucratic rules, but it makes it

¹ The *Constitutions* are silent about non-canonically-established Groups, whereas these, usually smaller, groups are numerous in England and Wales. References from the Generalate in Rome are to “Groups in Formation”, which implies that they are a temporary stage, whereas for most but not all purposes we treat them on a par with Communities. The Checklist will point out where Group Leaders have different responsibilities to Community Presidents.

more necessary than ever that Presidents have some guidance about what is expected of them.

This checklist will be in three sections:

1. The role of the President or Group Leader
2. Checklist of actions immediately on election or appointment
3. Checklist of continuing responsibilities

1. The Role of the President or Group Leader

The President convokes and presides over meetings of the community [*Constitutions* §51] but, much more than that, she maintains oversight over all the actions of the community, even if she is not involved in them all, and she watches out for the spiritual and material welfare of each of its members. She animates the community with zeal, but she is careful to pursue what is good for the community rather than follow her own preferences, making sure that the whole community is consulted and involved and that significant decisions are taken by the Council, which is the governing body of the Community.

The President is also the public face of the community, being the usual first point of contact by outsiders and being responsible for representing the Community to the rest of the Order and to the public at large. If she is fortunate, she will be able to delegate to the Secretary the dissemination to the community of routine information; and other members might take on tasks such as writing for *The Vine* or speaking at outreach events. But in every case, the President will need to ensure that things are proceeding as they should, and she will have an important personal role in establishing a good relationship with the Regional Representative, other Presidents and selected local ecclesiastics.

The President has a specific pastoral role in maintaining contact with distant members and, in the absence of a Spiritual Assistant, being able to point members to sources of spiritual advice. More will be said on this in the “continuing responsibilities” section.

2. Checklist of actions on Election as President

(i) Convene an immediate meeting of the new Council to choose the officers of the Community

Assuming that the new President was elected at the same time as a new Council on the usual three-year cycle, her first action is to convene a meeting of the newly-elected Council, usually following on immediately after the elections. They then elect a Director of Formation – who may be one of themselves – from among those who have made definitive promises: if she is not one of themselves, then she also becomes a member of the Council. The Council then chooses a Secretary and a Treasurer – who may be from among themselves – from among the members of the community: they do

not have to have made their first promises, although they must have been accepted into formation. If the Secretary is not already a Councillor, she attends meetings of the Council, but without a vote. The Treasurer, if not already a Councillor, may be invited to attend parts or all of some or all Council meetings. Although it is desirable to fill the positions of Director of Formation, Secretary and Treasurer as soon as possible, it is more important to choose the right people, and the President may defer filling any of the positions to the next Council meeting, which should not, however, be delayed.

If, instead of being elected on the three-year cycle, the incoming President is coming in to serve out the remainder of the previous President's term, then convening an immediate Council meeting to fill the offices of Director of Formation, Secretary and Treasurer is not necessary, but if the incoming President was previously a member of the Council, then the Council will have to decide whether to backfill the Council vacancy by a new election or by co-option, or to leave it unfilled – the choice may well depend on how long it is until the next triennial election: in any case, their choice should be reported to the Regional Representative as a matter of transparency.

(ii) Locate and/or obtain copies of the working records of the Community

A President is entitled to a copy of the OCDS National Address List, for her personal use only (although information from it can be given to any member who has a need for it). A copy can be obtained from her Regional Representative or from the National Secretary.

You will also want access to copies of previous minutes of the Council Meetings of your Community. A complete copy should be held either by the previous Secretary or the previous President. It is in order for the incoming Secretary to keep the official series of minutes, but you should have a paper or digital copy of at least the more recent meetings for your personal reference. Likewise, you should ask the outgoing President for copies of currently live correspondence she was dealing with and, ideally, have a detailed handover discussion with her.

You should check on the whereabouts of the Attendance Register – it should be with the Secretary – and on the whereabouts of the Community's List of Members, with their contact details, dates of admission into formation etc. That may be with either the Secretary or President.

The outgoing Treasurer should have a series of the financial records of the community, which need to be handed on if a new Treasurer takes over. If your community has a bank account there probably will need to be changes to the authorised signatories (which will take time). If it does not, then someone needs to be keeping a sufficiently large float – in cash and/or in an identified personal bank account – to meet the day to day needs of the Community.

Finally, there are miscellaneous working documents, such as retreat programmes, programmes of events your community has organised, documents relevant to your formation activities etc, which could be useful for future events. They are not an

immediate priority, but you should find out where they are – the outgoing President may well be happy to dump them on you for future sorting into Working Document, Rubbish or Archive Material. In any case, all the OCDS documents should be kept in a safe place, with instructions to family or a close friend about getting them to the Community if you are incapacitated.

(iii) Inform others of the election result

You should tell your regional representative of your election and give her your contact details. You should also tell her the outcome of the Council elections and the appointment or re-appointment of Officers.

News of your election and contact details should also go to the Registrar and the National Secretary (for the OCDS Address List).

It will be a courtesy also to inform the National President and Treasurer of your election.

A note of the election results (President, Councillors and Director of Formation) – but without contact details – should be sent for inclusion in the next issue of *The Vine*.

Groups do not have the privilege of electing their Group Leader (see under “Elections” in Section 3), but a change of Group Leader, when it happens, should be notified as above.

3. Checklist of Continuing Responsibilities

(i.a) Having a well-functioning Council (applies to Presidents only).

Having elected their President, the community will look to her to set its tone, and may be inclined to sit back and let her take the lead, especially if she is willing to do most of the work. However, a well-functioning Council will give her supportive advice, take responsibility for making decisions, and be willing to help in any undertaking. The history and circumstances of each community are so different that one cannot generalise, but here are a couple of considerations:

- The *Constitutions* advise that the Council should meet frequently, and that makes sense in a large community where decision-making necessarily has to be made by a smaller group. However, many communities have ten or fewer active members, not all of whom will have made promises, and having quite routine decisions taken by a Council with, say, five attendees can create a sense of exclusion for the others. For small communities, it has often been found better to discuss and take most decisions in the whole group, with maybe as few as two Council meetings a year to deal with issues such as reception into formation and the making of promises or where the confidentiality of Council discussions is important.
- The election method prescribed in the Local Statutes is one which, if there are two factions in the community, will deliver all the Council members to the majority faction and none to the minority faction. That is good for confidentiality and for having

amicable internal Council discussions, but the President should be prepared to go to great lengths to ensure that those with minority views do not feel excluded, finding a way to let them express their views and, where possible, framing and adapting the community's activities to take account of them.

(i.b) Groups and Group Leaders

For Groups, the only formal leadership positions are Group Leader and Director of Formation (c.f. *Constitutions* §51, which implies that a leader cannot fulfil both positions except temporarily). This means that in small Groups decisions are taken on a consensual basis, except those involving personalities, which will be decided by the Group Leader and Director of Formation.

However, as a Group grows in size, it is good for it to start adopting some of the disciplines prescribed for a Community. If there is a member able and willing to act as Secretary or Treasurer, then they should do so. And sometimes it can be worth constituting an informal Council to advise the Leader and Director of Formation on individuals and to smooth out any sensitive or contentious issues unsuited for discussion by the whole Group. (They should be selected on an objective basis, such as “all those with definitive promises”, so as not to show favouritism).

(ii) A good Formation programme

The Director of Formation has a specific responsibility for candidates for first and definitive promises and often takes the lead on other aspects of formation: a President is fortunate indeed if she has a Director of Formation who is learned, experienced and able to organise a systematic formation programme. As President, her responsibility is always to ensure that there is a good formation programme running and that the whole community is involved in it. Apart from providing help and encouragement to the Director of Formation, she may find herself doing quite a lot of formation herself as well as much of the organisational work, while encouraging members of the Council and other members with particular talents to take on specific formation tasks.

Because formation is an activity that everyone is involved in, the general nature and style of formation activities as well as the topics for continuing and initial formation are very suitable for discussing at meetings of the whole community, so that everyone is aware that formation is something that they participate in, rather than receive passively. But the President may need to shape and define the discussion to produce a usable outcome.

There can be a very useful role for outside speakers or even well-chosen recordings, and the President and Director of Formation should be active in seeking opportunities to find and use them.

(iii) New Enquirers interested in joining the Secular Order

Enquiries via the OCDS website are normally referred to the relevant Regional Representative for action. Depending on the nature of the enquiry, the Regional

Representative may respond to the initial enquiry herself and judge the best course of action before passing the enquirer on to the community best placed for the enquirer's initial contact, or she might pass the enquirer directly to the community. In either case, the President is normally the first point of contact with a community. That will also be the case for most of those who apply to the community directly. We welcome new enquirers and the bar for someone coming as a visitor to explore a Secular Carmelite vocation is low. However, especially if there has been no prior contact by the Regional Representative or a community member, the President should not be afraid to filter out those who are obviously unsuitable because of their health or mental state or a complete misconception about the Secular Carmelites. In any case, the eventual decision to admit an enquirer into formation is always a collective decision by the Council and, even before that, the President and Council members should be assessing new enquirers.

(iv) Detached Members

The President has to see that contact is maintained with those members who because of age, illness, distance or other reasons are not attending community meetings. Different communities will have had different experiences with this, but one can distinguish three categories,

- those who would like to maintain contact and participate as much as possible,
- those who are happy to maintain contact, but who, because of age or because their interests have moved on, no longer want regular involvement with the community,
- those who are uninterested in contact with the community and almost never respond to attempts at contact.

The nature of contact will depend on the resources of the community and on the individual concerned and, for example, whether she has particular friends in the community. In every case the aim is to sustain the member's Carmelite vocation and her loving friendship with the community, but not at the expense of the normal functioning of the Community.

(v) Annual Secular Carmelite Retreat

The President should encourage all the members to go on an annual Secular Carmelite retreat if possible, and, if her own situation allows, she should lead by example. We recognise that for some members, particularly those with young children, this can be difficult, and the President and her Council should look for ways to make it easier, for example by arranging shared transport or attendance at only part of the retreat. The OCDS National Council has organised a fund to operate every year to help members who otherwise could not go on a retreat.

(vi) Spiritual Direction

A Secular Carmelite community contains a wealth of spiritual wisdom and is a source of supportive spiritual love and friendship. Occasionally, however, a member will want one-to-one spiritual direction and the President (and the Director of Formation) should

be able to offer advice on where this can be obtained. Sometimes it will be sufficient to wait until a Secular Carmelite Retreat, when there is normally the opportunity to go to a Carmelite Friar for confession or for spiritual direction. There are also a number of experienced Secular Carmelites who have had training in spiritual direction and will be happy to give an initial consultation to any Secular Carmelite. Regional Representatives may know of trained Secular Carmelites in their Region or of other reliable spiritual directors; and Annette Goulden, as National President, can provide further advice. The advent of on-line video consultations provides opportunities that did not previously exist. (Those seeking spiritual direction should be aware that although one or more initial consultations will be provided for free, trained spiritual directors often give up other income in order to make time for spiritual direction, and will expect a goodwill offering if they are going to provide regular spiritual direction).

(vii) Responsibility for Regional and National OCDS matters

The President represents her Community regionally and nationally. When possible, she should attend Regional Days herself and encourage her community to do so as well, and she should be willing to help in setting them up, according to the custom in her Region.

The President, or the Secretary under her direction, should be diligent in disseminating to her members the Carmelite information that is sent to her for onward transmission, as well as *The Vine*.

The President receives a copy of the Summary Minutes of every quarterly OCDS National Council meeting. She should read it carefully herself and, at her discretion, may share it with members of her community. Personal or other sensitive material is excluded from the Summary Minutes, so any Secular Carmelite may read it, but it should not be passed in any form to a non-Secular Carmelite.

Every Community President is entitled to participate in the triennial Presidents' Conference, which is the policy-making body for the English and Welsh Secular Carmelites. Group Leaders are also generally invited to participate. For both Presidents and Group Leaders, attendance is obligatory, unless there is a serious excusing reason.

Each community is obliged to contribute to the Jubilee Fund (the OCDS national fund for meeting central OCDS expenses and making an annual contribution the Generalate in Rome). It is up to each Community to decide on the source of funds for meeting this obligation.

(viii) Relationship with the Carmelite Friars and Nuns

Communion and collaboration with the First and Second Orders is a joy for Secular Carmelites. In the nature of things, this is often organised on a regional or national basis, but individual communities will seize suitable opportunities. The Local Statutes point out a specific obligation on communities "to contribute to the upkeep and costs of the centre where [their] monthly or other meetings take place." In many cases, church halls and other centres have a fixed scale of semi-commercial charges. For communities that are privileged to meet on Carmelite property, however, it is a matter of Family

collaboration, and property services, like personal services in either direction, are not expected to be paid for, although a payment can be a much-appreciated sign of solidarity.

(ix.a) Community Elections

Elections for canonically-established communities must be held every three years. The procedure for doing so is set out clearly in the Local Statutes. Note that the President must give at least four weeks' notice of the date to all members. She must also invite the Provincial Delegate to attend the election to scrutinise the vote or to authorise a deputy to act on his behalf: he will usually nominate the Regional Representative to do so, but it is open to the outgoing President to suggest another independent scrutineer.

(ix.b) Appointment of Group Leader

Whereas a Community President derives her authority from election by her community, the Leader and the Director of Formation of a Group ultimately derive their authority from the consent by the Provincial Delegate to their appointment. In practice, Group Leaders emerge in different ways. For example, many were started by a core group of Seculars from one or two communities, and the founders decided among themselves, with the oversight of their mother community, on who would be Leader and who would be Director of Formation. But the position of Group Leader is not an appointment for life. The Regional Representative will advise the Provincial Delegate if governance arrangements are not working well, and any change of Group Leader (or Director of Formation) must be done transparently, with, so far as possible, the support of the whole group, and not by a private arrangement.

(x) Transfer between communities

Transfers between communities may take place with the agreement of the Councils of both communities. Presidents should be aware of this possibility and that, for a variety of reasons, an agreed transfer might be an opportunity for a member in her present community to pursue her Carmelite vocation more fruitfully in another. And there have been quite a few instances where a member was not fitting in well in one community but flourished on her transfer to another.

(xi) The President is not alone

Presiding over a happy community is a deeply rewarding experience. But, like all leadership positions it can be lonely and stressful. One is the servant of others, liable to sudden calls on one's time and seemingly responsible for everything. Friends will help, but one cannot discuss community matters completely as between equals, and one needs to avoid showing partiality.

Other Presidents, if they are friends, may be someone one can talk to and they will have experience of their own to draw on. And the Regional Representative ought to be a great support. Even if you do not have a particular rapport with her, she will start from a position of great sympathy and will probably have experienced, or at least know

instances of, whatever trial you may be going through. Her sympathy and advice might be all you need. But if you want her to intervene, you'll know that, while she will try to be completely impartial in her judgements, she will always act in a way that does not undermine the President's authority.

While you will not want to involve them in trivial matters or expect them to intervene in internal Community affairs, as President you have open access to the National President and to the Provincial Delegate. They will be delighted to help you in your own troubles and will be uniquely well placed to suggest ways of resolving – or patiently riding out – community difficulties that might seem intractable.