

Testing and Discerning a Vocation to the Secular Carmelite Order (OCDS)







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The point of this presentation is to answer the question “What are the principles that you use to discern the vocation to the Secular Order? Who is called to be a Secular Carmelite and how do you distinguish between those called and those not called?” Among the friars and the nuns, people do not leave because they are bad people. People are not sent home from the monastery or the convent because they are morally unacceptable. It is a vocation to be a member of the Order and one that needs, for everyone's sake, to be clearly identified. Otherwise, the Order, either the friars, or the nuns, or the seculars, loses its way and confuses its identity

I would describe a member of the Secular Order of Our Lady of Mount Carmel and Saint Teresa of Jesus as a practicing member of the Catholic Church who, under the protection of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, and inspired by Saint Teresa of Jesus and Saint John of the Cross, makes the commitment to the Order to seek the face of God for the sake of the Church and the world.

I would note in that description six distinct elements that, coming together, are those elements that move people to approach the Order and seek identification with the Order in a more formal way.

Six elements:

1. **“Practising member of the Catholic Church.”** 
2. **“Under the protection of Our Lady of Mount Carmel.”** 
3. **Inspired by St Teresa of Jesus** 
4. **Commitment to Carmel as an Ecclesial event** 
5. **Seeking the Face of God** 
6. **“for the sake of the Church and the world.”** 



1. Participating Fully in the Eucharist

“Practising member of the Catholic Church.” By this I mean Roman Catholic, which refers to the unity under the leadership of the Bishop of Rome, the Pope. The majority of Roman Catholics belong to the Latin Rite. There are, however, other rites within the Roman Catholic Church, Maronite, Malabar, Melkite, Ukrainian, etc. There are Secular Order communities in each of these rites. The entire OCDS community of Lebanon belongs to the Maronite Rite. The word “practising” specifies something about the person who can be a member of the Secular Order. As a basic litmus test of “practising” the Catholic faith I suggest the capacity to participate fully in the Eucharist with a clear conscience. The Eucharist is the summit of Catholic life and identity. It is the meeting point of heaven and earth. So, if one is free to participate in the summit, then the lesser points of participation are certainly permitted.

For most cases in the past this was rather simple to determine. People who came to the Secular Order came from parishes where the friars were present, or through contact with friars or nuns who recommended them to the Secular Order. Divorce was not a major factor in Catholic life. Most situations were clear.

It is not so today. Things are not always clear. It is precisely here where the Spiritual Assistant can be of most help to the Council of a community of the Secular Order in the screening of candidates. I give an example. A woman approaches a community of the Secular Order. The woman is known by some of the Council. They know that this is her second marriage. They also know that she regularly goes to Mass and participates in the sacraments. The Council would like clarity before admitting this person to formation.

There are a few possibilities with this case. The Church annulled the first marriage. Or, by arrangement with her confessor, she and her husband are living in such a way as to participate in the sacraments of the Church. An interview with the Spiritual Assistant would clarify the answers. Without necessity of too much explanation to respect the right to privacy and a good name that every member of the Church enjoys, he could give the word to the Council that would allow this person to enter the Secular Order.

The Secular Order is a juridical part of the Order of Discalced Carmelites. It is an institution of the Roman Catholic Church and subject to the laws of the Church. The Sacred Congregation must approve its own legislation. Therefore, someone who does not belong to the Catholic Church may not be a member of the Secular Order. Non-catholic people with interest in the spirituality of Carmel are certainly welcome to participate in whatever way a community might invite them, but they cannot be members of the Secular Order.

Here we have the first element of the identity of a Secular Order member—a person who participates in the life of the Catholic Church. There is, of course, more, because there are millions of people who participate in the life of the Catholic Church who have not the slightest interest in Carmel.



2. “Under the protection of Our Lady of Mount Carmel.”

We come to the second element—“*under the protection of Our Lady of Mount Carmel.*”

It is not just any devotion to Our Lady that identifies a person called to the Secular Order. There are many Christians who are very devoted to Our Lady and have a very highly developed Marian character to their Christian life. There are many Orthodox Christians as well as High Church Anglicans who are very Marian. There are many Catholics who wear the scapular for all of the correct reasons and with sincere dedication to Mary who are not called to be Secular Carmelites. Not only that, but there are some people who come to the Secular Order precisely because of devotion to Mary, the scapular, and the rosary who do not have a vocation to be Secular Order members.

The particular aspect of the Blessed Virgin Mary that must be present in any person called to Carmel is that of an inclination to “meditate in the heart”, the phrase that Saint Luke’s gospel uses twice to describe Mary’s attitude vis-à-vis her Son. Yes, all the other aspects of Marian life and devotion can be present, devotion to the scapular, the rosary, and other things. They are, however, secondary to this aspect of Marian devotion. Mary is our model of prayer and meditation. This interest in *learning to meditate* or *inclination to meditation* is a fundamental characteristic of any OCDS. It is perhaps the most basic.

A very frequent experience of many groups is to have a person approach the Secular Order to become a member, sometimes a diocesan priest, who is very devoted to Mary, a person who has been on many pilgrimages to Marian shrines throughout the world, a person who is very familiar with many of the apparitions and messages attributed to Mary, a real authority on current Marian movements. Many times they do not have the slightest inclination to “meditate in the heart”. They desire quickly to become the ‘teachers’ of the community about the Blessed Mother and introduce an entirely un-Carmelite strain of Marian interest into the community. If this person is a priest, it is very difficult for the community to protect itself from this detour in its Marian life. There are other Marian groups and movements that might be the home for this person, but it is not the Secular Order.

In addition, within the Teresian Carmelite family there is a place for people whose primary motivation is devotion to the scapular and Our Lady of Mount Carmel. It is the Confraternity of the Brown Scapular, or the Confraternity of Our Lady of Mount Carmel.

Mary, for a Secular Order member, is the model of a meditative attitude and disposition. She attracts and inspires a Carmelite to a contemplative way of understanding the life of the mystical body of her Son, the Church. It is she who draws the person to Carmel. And in the formation program, which the person finds when they enter Carmel, it is this aspect that must be developed in the person. So, I say that this is the second element—“under the protection of Our Lady of Mount Carmel.”



3. Inspired by St Teresa of Jesus

“A member of the Secular Order of Our Lady of Mount Carmel and Saint Teresa of Jesus is a practising member of any of the rites of the Roman Catholic Church who, under the protection of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, and inspired by Saint Teresa of Jesus and Saint John of the Cross...”

Here we have the third element. I mention both Saint Teresa of Jesus and Saint John of the Cross and I might say, right at the beginning of this section, that I also include Saint Therese of the Child Jesus, or Blessed Elizabeth of the Trinity or Saint Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, (Edith Stein) can also be included, but Saints Teresa and John of the Cross are central to this point.

Having mentioned all of those great people of the Carmelite tradition, I underline the importance of Saint Teresa of Jesus, whom, in our tradition we refer to as Our Holy Mother. The reason is because she is the one to whom the charism was given. In many parts of the world we are called Teresian Carmelites. Saint John of the Cross was the original collaborator with Our Holy Mother in both the spiritual and juridical re-founding of Carmel in this new charismatic way. So he is called Our Holy Father. It is hard for me to imagine any Discalced Carmelite of any brand who is not attracted by one, if not both of these persons—their histories, personalities, and, most importantly, their writings.

The writings of Saint Teresa of Jesus are the expression of the charism of the Discalced Carmelites. The spirituality of the Discalced Carmelites has a very well based intellectual foundation. There is a doctrine involved here. Doctrine comes from *docere*, Latin for 'to teach'. Any person who wants to be a Discalced Carmelite must be a person with an interest in learning from the teachers of Carmel. There are three Doctors of the universal Church, Teresa, John and Therese.

A person comes to the community, a person with a great love of the Blessed Mother, who wants to wear the scapular in honour of Mary as a sign of dedication to her service. This person is very prayerful but has no interest in reading or studying the spirituality of the Teresian Carmel. This person tries to read one of the Carmelite Doctors but just cannot find the interest to keep reading. To me, this is a good person who may belong in the Confraternity of the Brown Scapular, but definitely does not have a vocation to the Secular Order of Carmel.

Academic & Intellectual aspects

There is an academic aspect to the formation of a Teresian Carmelite. There is an intellectual basis to the spirituality and identity of one who is called to the Order. And, as with each friar and each nun, each Secular represents the Order. A Carmelite that does not have the interest in studying or deepening the roots of his/her identity through prayer and study loses their identity and can no longer represent the Order. Nor does that person speak for the Order. Many times, when listening to a Carmelite speak it becomes obvious when hearing what is said that they have not gone beyond what they heard in formation years before.

This intellectual basis is the beginning of an attitude that is open to study. It leads to a deeper interest in Scripture, theology and the documents of the Church. The tradition of spiritual reading, *lectio divina* and time for study is the intellectual backbone of the spiritual life. *Good formation depends on good information.* When the information is bad, or absent, or incorrect, the formation stops or is stunted, resulting in confusion in the Secular. If that Secular, through some twist of fate, becomes somehow an officer of the OCDS community, the community suffers. It happens with friars and nuns, and it happens with Seculars.

This academic or intellectual basis is very important and has been sadly missing in many groups of the Secular Order. It is not a question of “being an intellectual” in order to be a

Secular. It is a question of being intelligent in the pursuit of the truth about God, about oneself, about prayer, about the Order and about the Church. Obedience has long been associated with the intellect and the virtue of faith. Obedience means openness to hearing (*ob + audire* in Latin). It is a radical attitude of the person to move beyond what that person knows. Education also comes from Latin (*Ex + ducere* to lead out of). Saint Teresa describes the person of the third mansions as almost stuck and unable to move. One of the characteristics of this person, permanently in the third mansions, is that they want to teach everybody else. They know it all. In reality they are disobedient and uneducable. That is, they are closed and unable to learn.



4. Commitment to Carmel as an Ecclesial event

The fourth element of the description is “who makes the commitment to the Order”. There are so many committed Catholics who are devoted to Mary and even experts in Saint Teresa, Saint John of the Cross—or one of our saints—who do not have the vocation to the Secular Order. These people may be contemplatives or even hermits, who spend hours in prayer and study each day, but do not have the vocation to be a Carmelite. What is the element that differentiates these people from those called to follow Christ more closely as Secular Carmelites?

Commitment to Carmel

It is not the spirituality, nor the study, nor the devotion to Mary. Simply put, the Secular Carmelite is moved to commit himself or herself to the Order and to the Church. This commitment, in the form of the Promises, is an ecclesial event and an event of the Order in addition to being an event in the life of the person who makes the Promises. In a certain sense, remembering always the person’s context of family, work and responsibilities that are involved in his/her life, the person who commits him/herself, becomes characterised as a Carmelite.

An ecclesial event within the Order

As I said, it is *an ecclesial event* and *an event of the Order*. It is for this reason that the Church and the Order have the essential say, in union with the candidate, in accepting and approving the commitment of the person. It is also for this reason that the Church and the Order give the conditions and set the terms for the content of the Promises. A person may want to commit him/herself to certain things, daily meditation or the divine office for example. But the Church, through the Order establishes the basic and broad lines of understanding with regards to this commitment.

The Secular belongs to Carmel. Carmel does not belong to the Secular. What I mean by that is that there is a new identity, one developed from the baptismal identity, which becomes a necessary point of reference. As the Church is the point of reference for the baptised person (the baptised person belongs to the Church), so *Carmel becomes the point of reference for the Secular*. The more “Catholic” one becomes, the more one recognises the catholicity of the church. The more one becomes Carmelite, the more one recognises the catholicity of Carmel as well. In fact, the person who commits him/herself to Carmel in the Secular Order discovers that *Carmel becomes essential to his/her identity as a Catholic*.

It is because the Promises are the means by which one becomes a Secular Order member that formation for the Promises is so important—formation and on-going formation.

Commitment to Community

An important aspect to this commitment is the commitment to the community. A person who wishes to be a member of the OCDS must be able to form community, be a part of a group

that is dedicated to a common goal, show interest in the other members, be supportive in the pursuit of a life of prayer and be able to receive the support of others. This applies even to those persons who for various reasons cannot actively participate in a community. In the formation of the future of the community, this social characteristic is one that should develop. There are many people who are introverted and quiet, but who are still quite sociable and capable of forming communities. And there are many people who are quite extroverted and at the same time incapable of forming community. In this question it is necessary to use common sense. Answer the question: “What will this person help the community to be in ten years?”

There is also the question of people who belong to other movements—for example the New Catechuminate, Focolare, Marian Movement of Priests, Charismatic Renewal. If a person’s involvement in other movements does not interfere with that person’s commitment to Carmel and that person does not introduce elements that are not compatible with OCDS spirituality to the community, then there is generally no problem. It is when the person distracts the community from its own purpose and style of spiritual life that problems begin. Sometimes there are people so confused that they come to Carmel and talk about Our Lady of Medjugorje and go to a Medjugorje meeting and talk about Teresian prayer.

The most important point is that the person must choose the Secular Order, and that commitment ought to be more important than other movements or groups.

This commitment to the Church through Carmel has both content and purpose. These are expressed in the final two elements of my description of who is a Secular Carmelite.



5. Seeking the Face of God

The fifth element of the description is “*to seek the face of God*”. This element expresses the content of the Promises. I could rephrase this element in various ways, “to pray”, “to meditate”, “to live the spiritual life”. I have chosen this one because it is Scriptural and expresses the nature of contemplation—a wondering observation of God’s word and work in order to know, love and serve Him. The contemplative aspect of Carmelite life focuses on God, recognising always that contemplation is a gift of God, not an acquisition as a result of putting in sufficient time. This is the commitment to personal holiness. The OCDS wants to see God, wants to know God and recognises that prayer and meditation now take on a greater importance. The Promises are a commitment to a new way of life in which “allegiance to Jesus Christ” marks the person and the way this person lives.

The personal life of the Secular Carmelite becomes contemplative. The style of life changes with the growth in the virtues that accompany the growth in the spirit. It is impossible to live a life of prayer, meditation, and study without changing. This new style of life enhances all the rest of life. The majority of Secular Order members who are married, and those with families, experience that the commitment to the OCDS life enriches their marital and familial commitment. Men and women OCD Seculars who work, experience a new moral commitment to justice in the work place. Those who are single, widowed or separated find in this commitment to holiness a source of grace and strength to live their lives with dedication and purpose. This is the direct result of seeking the face of God.

Holiness is always ecclesial

Is the essence of Carmel prayer? Many times I heard or read that affirmation. I am never sure just how to answer that. Not because I do not know what prayer is or because prayer is not of great importance for any Carmelite, but because I never know what the speaker or writer wishes to justify by the statement. If the person means by prayer personal holiness and the pursuit of a genuine spirituality that recognises the supremacy of God and of God’s will for

the human family, then yes, I agree. If the person means that I as a Carmelite fulfil my entire obligation as a Carmelite by being faithful to my prayer and that there is nothing else that I need do, then no, we do not agree. Personal holiness is not the same as personal pursuit of holiness. For a baptised member of the Church holiness is always ecclesial, never self-centred or self-content. I am never the judge of my own holiness. (*Nemo iudex in causa suo.*)

I am sanctified by the practice of the virtues, which is the direct result of a life of prayerful searching for God's will in my life. This is the Carmelite secret—prayer does not make us holy. Prayer is the essential element in Christian (Carmelite) holiness because it is the frequent contact necessary to remain faithful to God. This contact allows God to do His will in my life which then announces to the whole world God's presence and goodness. Without the contact of prayer I cannot know God, and God cannot be known to others.

The Discipline of Discipleship

To seek the face of God requires an unbelievable amount of discipline in the classic and original sense of the word—disciple, one who learns. I must recognise that I am forever a student. Never do I become a master. I am always surprised by what God does in the world. God is forever a mystery. The clues to God's existence always interest me. I find them in the events of life, single, widowed, married, family, work, and retirement. But they only become recognisable and clear through prayer, observing from the heart. The call to holiness is a burning desire in the heart and mind of the one called to the Secular Order. It is a commitment that the Secular must make. The Secular is drawn to prayer, finding in prayer a home and an identity.

This prayer, this pursuit of holiness, this encounter with the Lord makes the Secular more part of the Church. And, as a more committed member of the Church, the Secular's life is more ecclesial. As the life of prayer grows it produces more fruit in the person's personal life (the growth of virtue) and in the person's ecclesial life (apostolate.)



6. "for the sake of the Church and the world."

This leads me to the sixth element of the description "*for the sake of the Church and the world.*" This is the newest development in the understanding of the place of the Secular in the Order and in the Church. This is the result of the development in the theology of the Church on the role of lay persons in the Church, and applying that theology to the Order. Beginning with the Second Vatican Council's document On the Apostolate of the Laity, and its fruition with the Synods on the Laity in 1986 and the Consecrated Life in 1996 (*Christifideles laici* and *Vita Consecrata*) the Church has constantly underlined the need for a further commitment of the laity to her needs and the needs of the world. Saint Teresa had the conviction that the only proof of prayer was growth in virtue and that the necessary fruit of the life of prayer was the birth of good works.

An apostolate of prayer and holiness.

At times I hear a Secular say: "The only apostolate of the Secular is prayer." The word that makes that statement false is "only". A prayerful and obedient attitude toward the documents of the Church makes it clear that the role of the lay person within the Church has changed. The Rule of Life talked about the need of each Secular to have an individual apostolate. What *Christifideles laici* highlights is the importance of all associations in the Church, and the OCDS is an association in the Church, to develop group apostolate. Many Seculars, when they hear the mention of group apostolate, think that I am talking about the entire community being involved in something that takes up hours each day. That is not at all what "group apostolate" means. Paragraph 30 of *Christifideles laici* gives the basic principles of "ecclesiality" for associations and lists the fruits of these principles. The first fruit listed is a renewed desire for prayer, meditation, contemplation, and the sacramental life. These are things "right down Carmel's alley". How many people there are who need to know what our Carmelite Doctors of the Church have to say! If every Carmelite was dedicated to spreading Carmel's message, how many people would not be confused in the spiritual life! Walk into any major book store and see what nonsense is listed in the section entitled "mysticism".

Each community ought to answer the question as a community "What can we do to share with others what we have received by belonging to Carmel?"

We, as Carmelites, can help to clean up the mess by making known what we know. It is not an option. It is a responsibility. *Being a Carmelite is not a privilege; it is a responsibility, both personal and ecclesial.*

As I said at the beginning, it is not any one element that discerns the person who has the vocation to Carmel as a Secular. It is the combination that makes the difference.