

2008 State of the Province Report

First of all, on behalf of the Provincial Council, I'd like to thank everyone for coming and for the service which you give to your community. The past three years have been very busy years within the Province which have seen much change. The Provincial Council has learned much about the many communities in our Province and we have felt very blessed as we've gotten to know the many faithful members who have been responding to God's call to serve the Church through Carmel.

Part of the State of the Province Report involves statistics so let me get those out of the way quickly. We have 22 canonical communities and 15 Study Groups for a total of 37 Secular Carmelite groups. Currently we have one Group in Discernment developing in Omaha. We have a total of 874 members in our Province.

Over the past three years, we've had 217 people enter aspirancy, with 140 of those clothed but only 127 of whom are still information as of April. This means we have a retention rate of about 59% in the first years of entering the Order. This year we asked about those who were Definitively Professed who left the Order and a total of 46 people have left, for a loss rate of approximately 5%. We have 353 people currently in some stage of initial formation. There are 49 isolates in the Province. And finally, we had 41 members die over the past 3 years, including two in Katrina.

Over the past three years, the OCDS Provincial Council has visited every OCDS community and study group in our province. Some of the study groups have been visited more than once and we have one canonical community that has received more than one visitation due to problems. We have found most of our communities and study groups to be in reasonably good shape. In general, our visitations have been well received. Since in the past, most of our communities only received an official visitation when there was a problem, we did have to calm a few nerves in a couple places and reassure some folks that they were not in trouble but rather this was going to be something that would be happening on a regular basis for all of our communities. We also had just a few individual people who had negative reactions to having Seculars making the visitation rather than one of the friars. These appear to have been isolated incidents. The occasional feedback we've received after our visitations has been very positive with most of the comments being along the lines of how helpful the visitation was to helping the community function better.

Every community has room for improvement and some of our communities have more room than others. Generally, many of the recommendations we made related to mundane issues such as praying the Office more slowly, maintaining better records, the need to collect dues, and developing an attendance policy (as called for in the Statutes). Less mundane recommendations ranged from the need to bring the formation program into conformity with the provincial formation guidelines to adding a formation group for the Definitively Professed.

As we made the visitations, we found that certain areas/topics came up repeatedly. During the follow up meetings with councils, we spent a significant amount of time talking with them about formation and about how to do discernment. In addition to what we covered in individual visitations on these topics, the Provincial Council also hosted council workshops in New Orleans and in Dallas back in 2005. These were well attended and well received. These workshops spent much time on formation, discernment, how to

be a council, and other topics we felt councils needed to function well. We feel that our visitations supported the need for such workshops (not to mention the very positive feedback we received from attendees – the Dallas workshop folks wanted us to do these 3-4 times a year!) so next spring/summer we plan to offer workshops again.

One other way in which we've tried to address common issues that have come up in visitations is by having issues of the Flos Carmeli focus on specific topics. We've had issues focused on developing formation programs, discernment, and leadership (in anticipation of elections). For areas where a full issue was unnecessary, we have included various articles regarding good policy in things such as attendance, community finances, spiritual direction, etc.

Finally, an important resource that we have developed, again in response to what we've discovered in our visitations, is our provincial website. At first it was hosted on Elizabeth's personal yahoo account but once the friars set up their own domain, we were able to transfer the pages to a sub-domain and thus not have the pages so closely connected to a specific person. We regularly update our website whenever we come across information that we feel would be helpful to the Seculars of our province. Thus we have included links to formation materials from both the California-Arizona Province and from the Canadian English speaking province (who've done some really good work!).

That pretty much covers the positive side of things, but naturally, we've also had to deal with some negatives over the past three years. We found 4 instances of financial improprieties in our province. In each case, the intent was well meaning and the action was for a good cause, but it was an inappropriate use of community funds. There's probably more work to be done in this area and we're happy that the few improprieties were relatively minor and did not involve any malfeasance.

A few of our communities had rather inadequate formation programs. The formation guidelines have been very helpful in those cases in providing guidance to the Local Council on what needs to be done to improve formation. We still have a couple places where we have concerns about the formation program, we are hoping that by utilizing the Formation Guidelines we will see improvements.

Most of our communities have made the transition to the formation guidelines which are part of our Provincial Statutes. A few people have expressed concern to us about the amount of reading involved. So far, those concerns have been expressed by individuals who are Definitely Professed whereas the feedback we've received from those actually in formation has been positive. This is an area in which the Provincial Council intends to revisit after more time has passed. It is important to live with the formation guidelines for awhile before we know for sure whether the amount of reading is too burdensome. Our estimate is that most months of the formation program ask for about 100 pages of reading.

Many of our communities struggle with how to do discernment well. Discernment is the most important duty that our Local Councils have. It is important to note that when we make a discernment decision for or against allowing someone to be professed, we make this decision on behalf of the entire Order, not merely just our community. We have had a couple cases in areas where more than one OCDS community is located where one council will make a negative discernment decision on an individual who will then move to another OCDS community. If a Local Council has

discerned that someone does not have a vocation, the councils of all other OCDS communities need to respect that decision and not take in that person for formation in another community.

We've had some interesting experiences regarding discernment issues. Our Study Groups do not have the authority to approve people for profession and so those professions come up to the Provincial Council for approval. We have found this to be a good tool for training those councils in how to discern. We believe that our work with the Study Group councils regarding red flags that we see in some profession letters and interview summaries has greatly improved their ability to do discernment and moved them closer towards attaining canonical status. In fact, we sometimes wish we could work with some of our canonical communities in this way to help their councils improve their discernment skills.

While mentioning our Study Groups, we'd like to take a moment to remind them that reaching canonical status is a process which takes several years and involves a bit more than merely being able to check off the minimal requirements listed in the Constitutions and Statutes. We also look at how well the study group is maturing as a community, whether it has been able to handle changes in leadership without difficulty, the ability of the council to discern well, and other signs that the study group has the maturity needed to function in the more autonomous manner of a canonical community.

One area that has recently caught our attention is the number of TOCs (Third Order Carmelites) who have been transferring into the OCDS. We'd like to take this opportunity to remind everyone that while the Statutes do allow for such a transfer, we actually discourage it. A transfer between the Orders involves a change of vocation and the candidate needs to be able to articulate the difference between the Orders and why she thinks God has changed her vocation. Many TOCs move and when there is not a local TOC community, think its OK to just transfer into the OCDS but lack of a local TOC community is not a sufficient reason for the change of vocation. The Statutes do require that whenever a community has someone wanting to transfer, the Provincial Council should be consulted regarding at what point of formation that person should begin. We have access to the current TOC formation program so as to help in that discernment. But again, we'd like to emphasize that a transfer from the TOCs to the OCDS should be rare since it involves a change of vocation.

This year, per our statutes, was to be our first elections for Provincial Council. Five years ago when we first got started, we were hand picked. Last year, each of us on the Provincial Council discerned whether we were willing to continue for an additional three years or whether it was time for us to step down from this important service to our province. Our statues call for staggered terms of six years in length. This means that every three years 2-3 Provincial Council positions will change out. This was our way of being able to always have new blood on the PC while at the same time having some continuation of membership so that we don't lose the institutional knowledge. Our statues also limit us, not allowing two consecutive terms given that we felt that six years was more than enough time to serve. Gerald Alford, Amelia Wilken, and Pascal Alfano all discerned that it was time for them to step down. Nancy Thompson and I discerned that we were willing to continue so the numbers worked out just right for setting up the staggered terms. Had the numbers been different, we would have prayed to the Holy Spirit and drawn straws!

We have approximately 885 Seculars in our province and we sought nominations from all our canonical communities. Much to our disappointment, we received only six nominations. Last June, during our annual Provincial Council meeting, we contacted those nominees, explained something of what is involved in serving on the PC, time commitment, ability to regularly check emails, and such things and asked them to discern if God was calling them to be on our ballot. Three people discerned that they are unable to serve at this time, two of them due to limited availability of vacation time. This left us with just three candidates to fill the three open spots. So, we sought postulation from Fr Provincial to appoint these three candidates instead of holding an election and he readily granted the postulation. And so, at the beginning of June, Dorothy Mansen, Henrietta Albright, and Gloria Guajardo officially began serving on the Provincial Council to become along with Nancy and I, the second OCDS Provincial Council for our province. Karen Harris agreed to replace Anita Mendoza as our secretary.

As you can see, much has been accomplished over the past three years. Its truly amazing to realize as we looked back when writing this report on how far we have come in such a short amount of time. Our province has in many ways paved the way for our fellow Seculars in the other US provinces. A couple years ago when there was a big meeting of the National Council and all three Provincial Councils, everyone was very curious about how our visitations were going. When the California-Arizona Province made their Provincial Statutes public, we smiled at the many places where they borrowed from us...and in a few places wished we could borrow back from them. The Washington OCDS Provincial Council has been working for more than two years now to develop their statutes but has made very slow progress for reasons we're not quite sure about. They presented the draft of their statutes to their province back in April and again, we found many places where they borrowed from the work of the Oklahoma Province.

Our relationship with the friars remains strong as it should. They have asked our assistance in vocations work and so you hopefully took note of the brochure in your goodie bag outlining one small way that we can assist in those efforts. At the Provincial Chapter, we brought up the question of how the OCDS in our province collaborate with the friars. We see this as the beginning of a discussion that should be on-going. There is an Extraordinary Definitory happening in Madagascar right now. Fr Provincial was unable to be with us in Houston because he has to be at the Definitory. This Definitory is preparing for the General Chapter next year when friars from throughout the world gather to discuss the business of the Order and make plans for the next six years. Among those plans are a multi-year celebration of the 500th anniversary of the birth of St Teresa in 2015.

Also under discussion at the Extraordinary Definitory is the draft of a ratio on the OCDS. This ratio fleshes out some aspects of our Constitutions and provides further guidance. We anticipate it will get promulgated at the General Chapter next April and when it does, we encourage all our communities to take some time to study it.

In summary, our province is in fairly good shape. While there are areas, particularly formation and discernment, where there is still need for improvement, we feel good progress has been made. There is ample evidence that the Carmelite charism is alive and well in our province and that God is working through the seculars of our Order to enrich the Church.