

## **Some Reflections on Doing the Formation Readings**

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For all levels of formation, from aspirancy all the way through to on-going formation, we are asked to do some reading each month. Some months that reading is brief, taking only an evening to get through. Other times its more lengthy and may take several evenings to get through the amount given for a particular month.

How should we approach these formation readings?

First, it is important to recognize that we are not approaching these in a purely academic sense. As persons becoming familiar with and deepening our understanding of profound spiritual writings, we become informed of them, learning the basics so we are able to accurately begin to understand them, and we become formed by them. It is not "either – or". We can look to our formation readings, according to Fr Aloysius Deeney, as "the process whereby, with the help of others, we attempt to deepen our understanding of the relationship with God in the light of Catholic and Carmelite doctrine."(1)

How do we do that?

We do that approaching our readings with an eye to questions such as:

- how does this fit with what I already have learned on this topic?
- how do I relate to this topic in my own experience?
- how does it give me insight into my own spiritual life?
- how can this help me grow in my relationship with God? with my community?  
with my family and friends and coworkers? with the Church?
- what questions came up for me from this reading?
- how does this help me grow in the apostolate?
- how does this help me fulfill my Promise?
- how does this strengthen my vocation?
- how does knowing this help me grow in my prayer life?
- how do I grow in perseverance in the virtues by applying this principle?
- how can I integrate this reading into my daily life? how can I live it?
- what might be obstacles to my living this?

Another approach sometimes used by one Formation Director I know involves asking each person to come in with three things they took out of the reading for that month. The three things can be insights, questions that came up for them, something they didn't understand, something they disagreed with. She then uses those three things as the starting points of the discussion and sharing. She also finds that it helps give her a better feel for how well each person is relating to the readings and how they are progressing in formation.

In some ways, these especially open ended questions are more difficult and require different strategies of the reader than doing a word search for just the right answer. We can't simply look up these answers in the book. Instead, we have to spend some time truly listening at a deeper level to what the reading is saying to us. This deeper, formational reading is the kind that might lead us into prayer over something we've gotten out of the reading. It will most certainly lead us to greater spiritual growth. It builds a bridge between the ideas in the reading and our lives, forming us always in Carmel.

These kinds of formational questions also lead us to greater sharing when we gather in our formation or ongoing groups to discuss the readings of the month. Who among us has not been left in awe over what

someone in our community gleaned from their reading of the material that we had not seen? Or how often has a precious insight shared by another in the community, brought clarity to things which we didn't quite understand ourselves? Many times we come home from a meeting feeling inspired to pray and reflect more upon the topics of that month's study, based on what others shared from the readings we were assigned.

Fr Aloysius Deeney touches upon these aspects as well. He reminds us that this way of formation reading is much more challenging:

The challenges are first, the desire to deepen the understanding of the relationship with God. That can be very demanding... in fact, it is a lot easier to memorize Saint Teresa!

A second challenge is that you need others to help you and you need to help others. Also, not so easy.

The third challenge is that it is based on Catholic and Carmelite teaching, not just on the way I think about it all. (2)

It is also important to realize that if we truly have the vocation to Carmel, we will be reading much of this material again and again. We can lay aside perfectionism and the worry about mastering everything the first time we read it. In initial formation, we may read something fairly quickly, getting that introductory exposure to it and then later in on-going formation and again in our own personal reading, we go back and go through a particular work at a slower pace. Have you ever had to read something over and over before it finally sinks in? I certainly have and find new things each time I re-read one of our saints. And sometimes, I am reminded again of something I've known all along but which had slipped into the background.

This summer I will be celebrating 20 years since I was clothed and when I look back at the formation readings I did during initial formation and those that I continue to do as part of the on-going formation in my community, I am amazed and humbled to see how God has worked through them and through my community to bring me closer to Him, and hopefully to form me in ever more closely following His will for me. I have been blessed with formation directors and fellow community members who always call me and each other back to that deeper level of reading and those questions which can't be answered by looking it up in the book but rather by having to look it up in my heart.

(1) Deeney, Aloysius, OCD, Study and the Carmelite Secular, posting to OCDS yahoo group, article now available at <http://www.geocities.com/korvesem/Province/BestPractices/Formation/formationBP.htm>

(2) *ibid.*