

Council

A tradition of the Missionary Cenacle Family

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Missionary Cenacle Family Council
General Custodians:
Mrs. Josie Morales, M.C.A.
Sister Barbara DeMoranville, M.S.B.T.
Father Austin Walsh, S.T.
Ms. Margaret Hayes, B.T.M.I.
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Introduction

In June of 2000 the Missionary Cenacle Family (MCF) gathered and realized the need to understand the deep roots of council in MCF history, tradition, and practice. Sr. Barbara McIntyre, MSBT and Fr. Shaun McCarty, ST were requested, by the Missionary Cenacle Family Council, to research the tradition and write a document that could be used by all the members of the Family. This document represents their research and writing as well as the editing of Fr. Edwin Dill, ST and Sr. Brenda Hermann, MSBT

Clarification of Terms

Counsel:

Dictionary meaning: a mutual exchange of ideas, opinions, etc.; advice resulting from such an exchange.

Psychological meaning: help rendered to an individual or group so that they are able to achieve greater clarity, freedom, motivation, focus or balance in living more fully. The help comes by way of a congenial climate and a fruitful interpersonal exchange.

Theological meaning: the gift of the Holy Spirit that may be defined as one's disposal for the inspirations of the Holy Spirit in realm of practical, everyday life.

Council:

The dictionary defines council as a group of people called together for consultation, discussion, advice; a group of people chosen as an administrative, advisory or legislative assembly.

In the tradition of the Missionary Cenacle Family, council is understood as a gathering of members who engage in seeking counsel from each other under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Counsel as gift of the Holy Spirit:

Counsel is a gift of the Holy Spirit. Often referred to as “right judgment,” counsel renders the person docile and open to God’s counsel. It provides a solution to many difficult and unexpected situations and problems. This gift inclines one’s soul to be merciful to others.

In the Cenacle tradition we make a distinction between a method and a spirit of counsel. As method, council is a practical way in which we take counsel together in seeking the guidance of the Spirit to discover the will of God for us. As spirit, counsel is a habitual way of life marked by an on-going attentiveness to the Holy Spirit in everyday life.

The presence of the Holy Spirit:

In the Missionary Cenacle Family tradition of seeking counsel in Council, the gifts and fruits of the Holy Spirit were understood to be important to its practice. Particular gifts and virtues are necessary for the fullness of the virtue and gift of counsel.

Gifts:

Wisdom:

The gift of the Spirit that perfects the virtue of charity and brings light and love into the soul. Wisdom enables us to focus on the unseen consequences in determining the next steps to take; it provides simple, practical solutions in the midst of conflict and confusion. Wisdom is knowledge and the acting on that knowledge.

Fortitude:

The gift of the Spirit that disposes us to do what is good in spite of any difficulty and to do great or arduous things joyously and fearlessly despite all obstacles.

Fruit of the Holy Spirit:

The ultimate and delightful products of the action of the Spirit in us; the "harvest of the Spirit." Among several listings of the fruits of the Spirit in the letters of St. Paul is one in which he uses the term (fruit) in the singular: "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control." (Gal 5:22).

History of Council in Fr. Judge's Life

The practice of council in the MCF has its roots in the family life of Father Judge. According to the recollections of his sister and his nieces, the family, especially after the death of Mr. Judge, would hold council around the dining room table where they would discuss whatever problems arose. The youngest to the oldest would voice their opinions and then a decision would be reached and carried out. (Fr. Lawrence Brediger, Monograph/2)

The Vincentian Common Rule and the writings of Vincent de Paul refer to values connected with the practice of council. We can assume that Thomas Judge, as a Vincentian priest, was well grounded in these writings and was influenced by them. This further influenced his formation of the Cenacle. As a young priest, Fr. Judge, despite his reputation for impulsiveness and excessive zeal, was known to delay decisions while waiting the leading of the Spirit.

Emergence of Council and the Cenacle Movement:

It was at St. John's Parish, in Brooklyn, NY, that Fr. Judge brought together the women who were to form the first Cenacle group. As the members and their work increased, they

were introduced to the practice of repetition of prayer (sharing their reflections on Scripture) and to the process of council. Father would ask the associates for their advice and suggestions concerning the apostolate. He believed that their ideas might be better than his own. Soon, the structure of council emerged. Fr. Judge took Council seriously. He urged the members to pray to the Spirit for the gift of counsel as it was necessary to curb impetuosity, to free them from bias and love of one's own opinion. He insisted they examine their motives to prevent them from spoiling God's work.

Council developed into two types of gatherings: that of full membership and a smaller, inner Council made up of Custodians and their assistants. As the Cenacle continued to grow and experience opposition, Fr. Judge desired that the Cenacle be in tune with the inspirations of the Spirit. He began the practice of the perpetual novena to the Holy Spirit. On 11 June 1911, he wrote: *“Remember, an argumentative or disputative spirit is not ours. Like the Apostles in the upper Chamber, the first Cenacle, all our deliberations are marked by a peaceful and charitable and prayerful presentation of reasons. The rest we leave to the direction of the Holy Spirit... This should be the sentiment actuating all your Councils; then all these acts of human expedience will never have place in your deliberations. I thank God that until this day He has saved us from this and I humbly pray His Divine Majesty to save us always from this blight.”* (CMF 3285-90)

Sometime between the years 1911-1915, Fr. Judge wrote in a letter: *“The gift of Counsel is most necessary for us especially to help us to curb the impetuosity of our nature. Flesh and blood would lead and drive us but for this gift of the Holy Spirit. Some there are who, mistaking zeal for this impulse, are ensnared by the evil one. Everything is consequently spoiled because acting by their own spirit they are not led by the Spirit of God.”* (CMF 12315)

The South and the Emergence of Religious Congregations.

Starting a school in the south was a result of a Council meeting with Father Judge and his associates in Alabama. When it appeared that the townspeople of Opelika were opposed to a school run by Catholics, the associates – whom Father had invited down after getting permission from his Vincentian superior – took counsel with Father and decided to open a summer school in Phenix City for the children of the mill workers.

Father Judge reluctantly received the offer of the plantation and asked the prospective donor to pray about the matter. She offered again and the associates met in Council to discuss the merits of the offer. Father eventually accepted the heavily mortgaged property. This became Holy Trinity in Alabama.

During this time, Father kept in contact with the Cenacles in the north with letters and visits. He continually reminded them to hold Council. The minutes of an Elmhurst, NY Council meeting which he attended, in June 1917, report him saying: *“You are the custodians. I don’t think you are zealous if you fail to hold these Councils. You should hold a Council once a month.”* (MF 11999) In discussing whether Councils should be held as often as once a month, it was suggested that a meeting be held before the retreat on the first Sunday of the month.

In a letter to Sr. James, written in December 1921, Father Judge repeats his concern for Council: *“I have reason to fear anything that is done outside of Council. Let me know if you hold Council and how often. The longer I live the more and more I see the necessity of Council. Depend upon it, if we act on our own judgment, we are bound to failure and confusion: The words of the Holy Ghost are always before me. “Among the proud there are*

always contentions: but they that do all things with council are ruled by wisdom.”(Proverbs 13:10) (MF 5123)

Guarding the Primitive Spirit (1921-1933)

Throughout this time of great growth Fr. Judge continued to encourage the Cenacle associates, especially the Custodians, to “*do nothing outside of Council.*” He feared a reliance on “*our own judgment*” and was at times severe in telling one Custodian not to renew her vows if she couldn’t send him a report on Council in her Cenacle. (MSBT Archives, MF 3670)

When the Motherhouse was destroyed by fire in 1930, a Council was held to decide what to do. The question was whether to build a retreat house in the northeast or use money for the rebuilding of Holy Name of Jesus Hospital. Fr. Judge wrote to the MSBT Custodians and asked that all sisters professed five years or more pray to the Holy Spirit, place the decision before the Triune God, and come to a decision. Fr. Judge wanted to spend the money on the hospital. However, when the Sisters’ letters agreed with his choice he asked them to go through the process again, and after a Triduum of prayer to the Triune God, to be sure the choice was according to God’s will. The answers again came back in favor of the hospital.

MCF taking Counsel together

By 1922 there were 20 brothers, 190 sisters and 700 lay associates. Members of the Inner Cenacle (Sisters and Brothers) were urged by Fr. Judge to attend the Outer Cenacle’s (Lay Associates) Councils. These were made up of Custodians from both the inner and outer Cenacles. The purpose of these Councils “*was to seek remedies for problems, to move ahead, and to bring the Missionary Cenacle polish.*” (MSBT Archives,

MF 973) The use of three reasons for and three reasons against in making a decision is mentioned in several references including decisions about the St. Augustine Academy in Puerto Rico and the religious habit of the brothers.

As much attention and energy was focused on establishing the two religious congregations, there was renewed concern about the well-being of the Outer Cenacle. Fr. Judge and Mother Boniface encouraged the Sisters to attend Councils to support and motivate zeal among the outer Cenacles.

In the various letters and conferences of Fr. Judge as well as the constitutions of the Brothers and the Sisters, Fr. Judge was consistent and faithful to the practice of Council, ever reminding and pleading with all in the Cenacle that nothing be done without Council, as it *“is the heart, soul and brains of the movement.”* (MSBT Archives 3670)

From Practice to Rule

For many years before rules were finally drafted or submitted for approval, there was much counsel, deliberation, prayer and testing by experience. Following are some examples of the concepts and practice of council incorporated into the early rules of the Missionary Cenacle branches.

From the Outer Missionary Cenacle (1913-1914)

1. The Cenacle Council: This is composed of heads of different Cenacles and their secretaries; they should meet once a month for general discussion.
2. Inner Council: The counselors will be appointed by the Servant of all the Cenacles subject to the approval of the Spiritual Director and the Reverend Mother. The meetings shall be held monthly.

3. Disposition Necessary for Council: It is necessary that all, before coming to Council Meetings, shall individually and earnestly pray to the Holy Ghost for the gift of council (sic). We should enter with prayerful minds, free from bias and love of our own opinion. We should calmly state our views without tenaciously adhering to them, manifesting quietly and with holy indifference to our own interest and sentiments whatsoever the Holy Spirit may make manifest to us; we must avoid being wedded to our ideas and be prepared to the best judgment of the Council.

From the Original ST Constitution (1928)

1. It is of great importance, then, to a Custodian that he seek that one of his family who has received this breathing of the Holy Spirit. Let him remember it may be the youngest Brother who will possess the much sought, precious King's secret. He shall, then, transact nothing of importance without calling his family together and seeking their counsel.
2. The Outer Council shall gather once a week and every confrere, in a spirit of simplicity and humility, shall give his views on the matter proposed, with a holy indifference as to whether these be received or not. The Custodian shall show zeal for Council. If he would rule wisely let him be mindful of this counsel of the Holy Spirit, "Designs are brought to nothing where there is no counsel; but where there are many counselors, they are established" (Prov15: 22).
3. A Custodian should restrain the forward in Council and encourage the diffident so that all will open their minds in the Lord on the affairs proposed. Confreres admitted

to the Outer Council should consider themselves favored and honored with a great trust and confidence. They should neither canvas nor caucus before a Council, neither should they discuss council subjects. Called to express their views, in simplicity and obedience, without human respect or hesitation, they should give the thought that is in their minds. Who knows but that may be the very idea that religion needs, the long sought solution of a difficult problem. They may be consoled in this, even if what they say does not seem to appertain, nevertheless, it may suggest just the thing sought, though it takes some weeks or even months to ripen into usefulness.

From the Original MSBT Constitution (c. 1930)

The Missionary Servants of the Most Blessed Trinity will thank God for the practice they have of holding Council. Counsel is one of the gifts of the Holy Ghost.

1. She should be very much on her guard lest she bring any spirit but the Holy Spirit into the Council.
2. Before Council therefore there should be no canvassing or propaganda. There should be no evidence of a factional or intriguing spirit in the Council.
3. She should make manifest with great simplicity what the spirit of God puts into her mind for or against the matter under discussion.
4. The Holy Ghost is invoked upon its deliberations; therefore she will be content with the decision of the Council, since the love of God and not self-interest prompted it.

5. It is perfectly proper to state one's view orderly, even with vigor but never with contention. It would be such a grave fault against the Council to show offense if her opinions were not accepted; in fact, continued evidence of a sullen or angry spirit in Council is proof positive that such a Sister should not be permitted the privilege.

Key Elements in the Cenacle Tradition of Council

In the Missionary Cenacle tradition, Council is a method of taking counsel together. The spirit of counsel is a gift of the Holy Spirit, a habitual attitude rather than a method. A Council decision is to be reached through a spirit of objectivity and sense of the movement of the Holy Spirit within the person or the group.

The fundamental value of the practice of Council is expressed in these words of our founder: *"We must never forget the reasons and purpose because of which the Holy Ghost inspired*

us to come together in his divine name and cause...to seek the will of God for the Missionary Cenacle in this historical moment."(MF 3287)

Attitudes Needed for the practice of Council

1. Prayer and openness to the Holy Spirit

For Fr. Judge, prayer before, during and after council was essential. Prayer was necessary to attract the Holy Spirit in order to open minds and hearts to the Spirit's movements. Members were to be free from biases and self-serving ideas and plans. Fr. Judge believed that the leadings of the Holy Spirit

might be found in the sharing of ideas and opinions. Openness to the Spirit was to help Cenacle members tune in to the Spirit's movements within and to the Spirit's manifestations in others. Thus one finds in archival materials expressions such as these: *“Pray an hour in preparation...”* and *“All should individually and earnestly pray...”* (MF 10947)

2. Simplicity and Humility

Along with prayer and openness to the Holy Spirit, he encouraged simplicity and humility in expressing oneself in an honest, clear and direct manner, free of self-interest or mere expediency. *“In Council, every member, in a spirit of simplicity and humility, shall freely and respectfully give views as asked on the matter proposed,”* and *“(We) must speak out what’s in our heart.”* (MF 14329 [1928])

3. Holy Indifference

He often used the expression “holy indifference” in approaching a Council decision. It’s an expression in the tradition of spiritual discernment used by both Ignatius of Loyola and Vincent de Paul, referring to an attitude of inner freedom from self-interest in seeking God’s will, unrestricted readiness for whatever God asks. This expression does not mean a lack of care or concern; rather it implies an act of trust that the Holy Spirit will lead us to find and follow God’s desires. *“With holy indifference to our own interests...Approach with indifference what men will say or do...and “Speak the thing out, give it out with a holy indifference whether the thing be acted on or not...”* (MF 3727)

4. Information

Along with prayer and an open attitude, Fr. Judge realized that information was a necessary component in the

Council process. The council could make a diminished decision if it did not have sufficient information, for example, lack of funds for a worthwhile project.

The presentation of three reasons for and three against was a way for members to examine an issue from all sides. *“I asked for three reasons for and three reasons against it; Certainly for us to change our plans after all our prayer and counseling must demand a manifestation of God’s will a little, at least, out of the ordinary. To change now, I have thought of these three reasons for and against...”* and *“Work out your own reasons for and against...”*(MF 5687 [1924])

5. Apostolic Orientation

The point of coming together in Council was usually to gather the ideas, insights and feelings of each member of the group in order to make a decision about an important matter concerning the missionary work or to address significant challenges from within the membership. Council was pre-eminently for mission – to inspire it, to guide it, to further it. Decisions about sending missionaries on mission, accepting new works and methods of carrying out the apostolate were taken only after prayer and counsel. In addition to mission concerns, the subjects of council meetings dealt with significant matters of concern to the community such as investment of finances. *“Let us thank the Holy Spirit for giving us this means of furthering his work.... Consider the Council the most important part of the work...(Council) the inspiration of the Missionary work...It (Council) is for the good of the work.”*(MF 75 [1912])

5. Importance

The subjects of Council meetings were to be important matters such as decisions involving investments of finances, accepting new places of ministry or serious problems within the

community. So-called “Blunder Councils” were held occasionally to determine how things might be improved the next time around. *“Caution all to take Council meetings seriously....Do nothing without Council...Transact nothing of importance without ... seeking their counsel....”*(MF7108)

6. Ecclesial

Fr. Judge counsels the Cenacle missionary *“sentire cum ecclesia.”* This means more than just to think with the Church. In his own words, it means *“to get the heartbeat of the Church, her moods and thought...her ideals...her aspirations, her ways, her sense, her traditions ...her teachings.”* Attention to Church teaching as expressed in encyclicals and apostolic letters was important to him. (MF 7108)

7. Inclusiveness

Council meetings were to be inclusive. All who attended were expected to give forth what the Spirit gave them. Even the youngest associate, brother or sister, might be the one to speak out the needed words. However some level of membership or commitment was expected before one was part of a Council meeting or Council decision: *“Everyone has to tell me something....”* and *“It may be the youngest brother who will possess the...King’s secret.”*(MF 3728 [1928])

8. Regularity

Making the actual decision was not usually the work of the group gathered in Council. The final decision was often made by Fr. Judge himself or by a local custodian. This explains why so many of Fr. Judge’s exhortations and admonitions to hold Council and take counsel regularly were addressed to the custodians. How regularly Council was to be held varied somewhat from weekly to monthly.

9. Accountability

Fr. Judge was insistent on the necessity of holding Council. Perhaps his sternest request for accountability came in a letter to a Sister Custodian in March 1923: *“Do you hold Council in your Cenacle? What is the date of your last Council? Send me a transcript of the minutes of the last Council? If you have not been holding Council, have you any dispensation from this? Please answer my letter as soon as possible.... If you cannot make out your report before the 25th of March, do not renew your vows without stated permission. I am very anxious that these two blessed customs (Council and Charity) will flourish amongst usIf you do not have them to perfection in your house, I am afraid they will be lost to the Cenacle and losing them, it seems to me, we will lose one of the greatest means we have of obtaining the light and guidance of the Holy Ghost. I pray then, that you may have a zeal for these exercises and do let me know what there is in your house that would prevent their operation.”* (MF 003670)

Note:

MSBT Archives, MF 973 = Missionary Servants of the Most Blessed Trinity Archives, Master File, Philadelphia, PA.

MF = Missionary Servants of the Most Holy Trinity Archives, Silver Spring, Maryland

PART II

Practical Application of Council

Questions for Forming and Maintaining a Local Council

1. What is the difference between Council and counsel
2. What is the purpose of a Council meeting?
3. Why should we have them?
4. What kind of matters should be dealt with?
5. How often is "regularly?"
6. What are some hindrances to effective Council meetings?
7. What are some helps?
8. How can we encourage participation?
9. What dynamics/skills/attitudes would be helpful?
10. How do counsel/council relate to our mission? Our ministry? Our spirituality?
11. What priority should these meetings have in our schedules?
12. What is unique about our local situation that should be taken into consideration in implementing structures of council at the local level?

Content for Council

1. Helping individual members or the group to discern a particular matter.
2. Constitution/Directory.
3. Issues or concerns in society that demand our response

4. Missionary activity and its implications for our life as missionaries.
5. The Providence of our daily lives and how to be more responsive to God's call as missionaries.
6. Our relationship to each other and as Missionary Cenacle Family.
7. Concerns of the local or universal Church.
8. Issues, questions, concerns raised by the general custodians of our branch.
9. Choosing leadership.
10. Seeking common understanding about an issue.
11. Discerning our corporate spirituality.
12. Other serious topics brought forward by the group.

Common Elements in the Process

1. Prayer (before, during, and after) and waiting on the Holy Spirit.
2. Sharing thoughts.
3. Listening to each other and to the group.
4. Evaluating pros and cons.
5. Seeking guidance from companions on the journey.
6. Assembling significant data.
7. Weigh reasons for/against.
8. Trying to see both sides without necessarily agreeing
9. Proceeding without undue haste, but acting promptly when direction is clear.
10. Listening to the voice of everyday events, circumstances (signs of the times).
11. Allow the poor to have a special claim on our attention.

A Suggested Format for Council

Remote preparation:

1. Reading, reflection on the suggested issues or agenda concerns.
2. Reading, reflection on topics or issues generated in prior Council discussions.

Meeting:

1. Members gather for reflection and faith sharing on Scripture and/or other appropriate readings.
2. Members connect the issues for discussion with the Faith sharing: What does this reflection say to us about our concerns?

Taking counsel:

1. Everyone speaks and everyone listens to each other
2. Everyone speaks to the issue offering information, insights, suggestions or objections: reasons for or against.
3. Quiet time for reflection on the wisdom of the group
4. Revisit the scripture passage or reading
5. Return to the topic for discussion with each other.
6. Listen to the thinking and feeling of the group: what does God want of us?
7. Listen for consensus: where is the agreement or dissent?
8. Determine if you are ready to move from the issue, is something still unsettled, is more time needed?

9. Articulate the thinking and feeling of the group.
10. Determine who is to make the decision on each matter.

Reflection on the learning as a Council

1. Did everyone participate appropriately?
2. Were there obstacles that prevented members from full participation?
3. Identify what was helpful and what prevented full counsel from occurring together.
4. Identify how to deepen the process of seeking the wisdom of all the members, discerning the will of God for the Community, and the living out of the mission.
5. How am I/we continuing the practice of taking counsel together in our present circumstances? How might I/we better implement the tradition?

Blessed Be God the Father Who has Created us
Blessed Be God the Son who has Redeemed us
Blessed Be God the Spirit who Sanctifies us
Blessed Be the Holy and Undivided Trinity
Now and Forever.
Amen