

# Vinayasādhana

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## THE CHURCH IS A FAMILY OF FAMILIES

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## ***Editorial***

### **The Church is a Family of Families**

Pope Francis established the Year of the Family to help strengthen faith and live God's joy more fruitfully in family life. *Amoris Laetitia*, a post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation by Pope Francis, addressed families' pastoral care. It covers a range of topics related to marriage and family, challenges faced by families, and what the people in the faith community can do to accompany the family in difficult situations. Pope Francis states that the family is an image of the Trinity. While there is 'no perfect family...we are not perfect, do not get married to a perfect person, neither do we have perfect children,' we have to adopt a point of view of realism to avoid an abstract and artificial notion of marriage which is far from the lived experiences of families in the world today. Pope Francis referred to it as a particular year to grow in family love and an opportunity for a renewed and creative pastoral drive to place the family at the center of both Church and society. His hope for every family was that they might feel the living presence of the Holy Family of Nazareth in their home, which may fill the small domestic communities with sincere and generous love, a source of joy even in trials and difficulties.

The central theme of the January 2022 *Vinayasadhana* edition is 'The Church is a Family of Families.' The edition focuses on families and reflects on various aspects of families, parenting, the role of parents, and spiritual fathers, with a few articles reflecting on the characteristics of the Holy Family. It is no surprise that after almost two years of battle against the COVID-19 virus, one of the challenges amongst a variety of global issues has been the issue of stability in families. The Editorial brings into light the relevance of experiences and challenges of families as described in *Amoris Laetitia*, especially with the impact

of COVID-19, and how the Church can accompany families during difficult times as it is a Family of Families.

### **Joy of Love**

Pope Francis also invites us to understand the Joy of Love as a continuity with the wisdom and pastoral practice that comes with the long tradition of the Church. The teachings of the ‘word of truth and hope’ reflected upon are drawn the Scripture and Church’s teaching heavily in the Magisterium, especially in that of Pope Paul VI (e.g., *Humanae Vitae*), Pope John Paul II (*Familiaris Consortio* and the Theology of the Body in particular), Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI (*Deus Caritas Est*) and the Catechism of the Catholic Church.

The role of bishops and priests to provide pastoral care and support to families to help them realize their role in the Church is one of the emphases placed in the Church (*AL* 200, 202). The Church also has recognized that the lay faithful minister pastorally serves as specialists, family advisers, and consultants in various Church bodies (*Familiaris Consortio* 75). Hence the contribution is not limited to having concerns for families but an increase in the evangelization of parish communities as families. Such care and support require committed and enthusiastic pastors and increased involvement in the lay faithful.

World-renowned Family psychologist and researcher Gottman was a part of 40-year research with couples and what makes relationships work. In their book *Eight Dates: Essential Conversations for a Lifetime of Love*, they offered to empower ways to discover the loved one wants and deserves and brought out eight funs conversation-based dates for a lifetime of love: trust and commitment, conflict, sex and intimacy, work and money, family, growth and spirituality, and dreams. The goal of the book is to be able to love one’s partner more deeply each and every year of togetherness. In their study, they found out that the couples who were most likely to have happy marriages had the following qualities and characteristics when they talked about their relationships: fondness, affection, and admiration either verbally or nonverbally while expressing positive affect for each other; a sense of togetherness instead of separateness; expansiveness versus withdrawal where they share vivid and distinctive memories; and they glorified their struggles where they express pride that they survived difficult times, emphasize commitment to the relationship, and talk about shared meaning and purpose, values, goals, and life philosophy. Connecting to the message

given by Pope Francis, the book reflects a lot of how couples who move forward with love and forgiveness can have happier and long-lasting relationships.

**Challenges Faced by Families.** Some of the challenges that are mentioned in *Amoris Laetitia* includes the lack of personal communication between spouses that could make family life more humane, less support from social structures compared to the past, extreme individualism, which weakens family bonds and feelings of isolation, and fear of entrapment in a relationship, to name a few.

The lack of personal communication between the spouses and the decrease in social support are becoming more pronounced. With the COVID-19 pandemic, as families were pushed to sit together at home due to social restrictions, communication became evident as they were forced to face the situation day-in and day-out. The American Psychological Association (June 25, 2020)

While individualism can foster spontaneity and exploration of one's talents, it can develop attitudes of suspicion, fear of commitment, self-centredness, and arrogance (*AL* 33). In the collectivistic culture of India, the introduction of excessive individualization has brought about a lot of disharmony in the families. Future research can focus on how the Church and the Mental Health Community help assimilate positive aspects of individualism while respecting a collectivistic society's boundaries and constructive features. Studies have shown individualist behavior intended to serve collectivist interests (Sinha, Sinha, Verma, & Sinha, 2004).

Pope Francis also commented on the 'fear of loneliness and the desire for stability and fidelity that exists along with the 'growing fear of entrapment in a relationship that is hampering the achievement of one's personal goals. The fear of entrapment is associated with a range of related fears, including the fear of loss of personal freedoms, a fear of disempowerment or of being controlled, a fear of intimacy and relationship commitment, and a fear of being unable or unwilling to meet relationship expectations (Schinieder, 2019). Pope Francis has in the past met with and encouraged groups that help married couples in crisis to find ways to address the root problems in their relationship and move towards healing and renewal (Vatican News, 2021). A practical approach to the accompaniment of pastors and priests with couples

includes helping them improve communication and rediscovering their love for each other to strengthen their marriage.

**Family is the Cradle of Mercy.** The tone of Mercy was initially set by Pope John XXIII in his Spiritual Itinerary and later in his famous opening address to the Second Vatican Council. He talked about Mercy as a medicine for healing. Pope John Paul II wrote the second encyclical *Dives in Misericordia*, Latin for ‘Rich in Mercy,’ where he examines the roles of Mercy both in terms of God’s Mercy and the need for human Mercy. Through the Parable of the prodigal son (Lk 15: 11-32), he reminds us that Mercy is intended to give value and not humiliate the man. He reminds the Church to practice Mercy through the teachings of Jesus Christ. Benedict XVI, too, said:

“Mercy is indeed the central nucleus of the Gospel message; it is the very name of God... May all that the Church says and does manifest the Mercy God feels for mankind. When the Church has to recall an unrecognized truth or a betrayed good, she always does so impelled by merciful love, so that men may have life and have it abundantly” (*Regina Caeli*, 2008).

Pope Francis mentions that all of us are called “to keep striving towards something greater than ourselves and our families, and every family must feel this constant impulse. Let us make this journey as families, let us keep walking together” (*AL* 325). With neurological evidence showing brain plasticity in infants in the womb, data shows promising findings in how the human brain is conducive to change (George, 2017). As a cradle provides a safe space for the child, so should the family give a place of growth and development, nurture, and care for each of its members. This family could play a significant role in the sustainable and integral ecology as God placed the man and women in the Garden to be fruitful and take care of it. The *pastoral ministry can use the Amoris Laetitia* for guidance with families. Pope Francis said, “Marriage and family must be the central theme in pastoral care because the family is the way of the Church.”

**Children.** A report on the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Children, Youth, and Families (2020) drew upon Bronfenbrenner’s ecological system theory to understand a child’s immediate surroundings and expand to the larger environment: micro-level, which include the family and home life; meso-level which consists of the larger system with schools and healthcare; and the macro-level which indirectly

impact youth and families but permeate our communal beliefs, values, and culture. The use of the theory helped the report indicate that in all levels of a child's ecological system, the COVID-19 brought about challenges that need to be addressed. The issues with quarantine, social isolation, child abuse and neglect, family losses and separations, sleep disturbances, and exposure to unhealthy coping behaviors and environments are some of the challenges listed at the micro-level. At the macro level, school closures and limited access to mental health care is major challenge, especially considering how both parents and children at all levels were affected by this. In the larger community and society, there has been an increase in general anxiety, stigma against those testing positive for COVID-19, and racism, which can indirectly impact children and families. It is no small responsibility that the Church has on its shoulders to understand and care for the children in the community.

Time and again, Pope Francis returns to the topic of children. He understands parents are 'the foundation of the home' and children as the 'living stones' of the family (*AL 14*). He uses Psalm 128 to speak of "the gift of children" with the imagery drawn from the building of a house and the social life of cities (*AL 14*). Chapter 7 has been dedicated to the education of children. Parents need to consider their responsibility in ensuring that they are aware of what their children are exposed to, the forms of entertainment the children get, their peer groups, and their exposure to the contents in television and electronic media (*AL 260*).

Nowadays, researchers and practitioners in human development believe that early situations and connections matter (Shonkoff and Phillips, 2000). When provided with a close, true connection that gives love, nurturance, security, responsive collaboration, and consolation, children develop and flourish. As children and youth experience stress differently from adults, there is a need to identify and intervene early so that the long-term effects of stress can be diminished (Centres for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020). The responsible parent can look out for various possible signs of stress among teens and children: negative changes in behavior, recognizing that children' feeling sick' may be caused by stress; being aware of how the child or teen interacts with others, listening to words of distress, and seek support (APA, September 5, 2019). "Children are a gift from the Lord; they are a reward from Him" (Psalm 127:3). Jesus asks us to let the little children

come to him and not to hinder them as the kingdom of heaven belongs to children (Matthew 19:14). The priests and the Church community must often remind parents that it is a blessing and a responsibility to be parents.

**Parenting during COVID-19 Pandemic.** It is necessary to acknowledge that the COVID-19 pandemic has altered lifestyles and environments in the family due to social restrictions and work-from-home situations. UNICEF acknowledged that parenting in the pandemic is a critical issue of concern. The organization answered mental health questions, attaining balance, busy work schedules, and keeping children motivated during the pandemic. The challenge for parents is to realize that in addition to working on personal and workplace struggles, they have to acknowledge and be there for their children to help them cope with the pandemic.

As the pandemic stressors continue, children's mental health needs to be taken seriously. A whopping 71% of parents said that the pandemic took a toll on their child's mental health, and 69% of parents said that the pandemic was the worst thing to happen to their child (Ann & Robert H. Lurie Children's Hospital of Chicago, 2020). American Psychological Association (April 20, 2020), to help parents cope with the stresses of the present pandemic, gave seven pieces of advice: acknowledge your emotions, set boundaries, establish a routine, relax screen time rules, communicate with supervisors and co-workers, share responsibilities, and practice self-care. Among all of the suggestions, the common theme is that the individual needs to acknowledge their psychological needs and mitigate the present problems. Families, especially in post-pandemic times, need the help of the community they are a part of, and the Church plays a vital role in it.

### **Church: A Family of Families**

Pope Francis, in *Amoris Laetitia*, mentioned the words "accompany" and "accompaniment" more than 60 times. The challenge of the Church is to come to a new understanding of pastoral care of families, which primarily includes parishes and families that belong to them (Kamiński, 2009). Pastoral conversion is necessary for accompanying families (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 25). Pope Francis emphasized that family is the "fruitful covenant between a man and a woman." This family could play a significant role in the sustainable and integral ecology as God placed the man and women in the Garden to be fruitful and take care



of it. Jesus accompanies the Church through the difficulties of bringing the Gospel to the family (*AL*, 60). Likewise, pastors must work to make people feel welcome in the Church. *Amoris Laetitia* offers the vision of a pastoral and merciful church that encourages people to experience the “joy of love.” The family is an essential part of the Church because, after all, the Church is a “family of families” (80).

One of the ways in which the Church and pastors can achieve pastoral care is by focusing on the sacrament of marriage (*AL* 200, 202). Accompanying engaged and married couples can help them learn and live a life of spirituality in the family. Also, understanding families as units that require care to strengthen their faith and mature in love (*AL* 211, 230) is necessary among pastors who need to be more enthusiastic in using their knowledge of the Scripture and position to help families.

According to Pope Francis, there are two aspects at the heart of all family ministry: “the frankness of the proclamation of the Gospel and the tenderness of accompaniment.’ The Church needs to help the couples, spouses and families grasp the ‘authentic meaning of the union and love, the sign and image of Trinitarian love and the covenant between Christ and the Church.’ The giving and caring nature of the Church thus entails the Scripture-based understanding of a family that accompanies each other during difficult times. “Holy Family of Nazareth, make us once more mindful of the sacredness and inviolability of the family and its beauty in God’s plan” (*AL* 325).

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# Healing Power of Forgiveness in Family Relationships

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## Abstract

The Bible provides invaluable lessons for steering family conflicts towards favorable resolutions. The article reflects on the brokenness of Joseph's family as his brother betrayed him and God's plan and action of taking simple and ordinary people to show His bigger plan. From disarray, Joseph was slowly brought up in power and position to finally a time when he could enact forgiveness, reconciliation, and reunion with his family. He took steps that can be seen as viable steps that family relationships can use to heal their brokenness. The article also reflects on various ways to pursue reconciliation from Prophet Hosea.

*Keywords:* Joseph, Forgiveness, Reconciliation, Prophet Hosea

## Introduction

The family plays a vital role in the Bible. The Bible begins with a focus on the bond established between God and humankind and between man and woman. The latter is the foundation stone of a family. The unique relationship between man and woman is expressed in the affirmation that woman is "bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh" (Gen 2:23). This phrase indicates kinship. The establishment of the institution of family is implied in the sentence, "Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh" (Gen 2:24). As Dearman (1998) notes, all these expressions show that "the creation points to the institution as the foundation of human community." He

further elucidates, “Rather than beginning with the possibilities of individuality and autonomy... the family etiology of Genesis begins with the human community as a fleshy union, the first human institution formed at the dawn of creation.”

As the Catholic Church celebrates the year of the family based on *Amoris Laetitia*, it is opportune to consider the need for forgiveness and reconciliation in fostering the family, based on some Biblical accounts, because Pope Francis writes in *Amoris Laetitia*,

The truth is that “family communion can only be preserved and perfected through a great spirit of sacrifice. It requires, in fact, a ready and generous openness of each and all to understanding, to forbearance, to pardon, to reconciliation. No family does not know how selfishness, discord, tension, and conflict violently attack and at times mortally wound its own communion: hence there arise the many and varied forms of division in family life... (AL 106).

The Bible deals with many families and stories, but it seldom narrates an ideal family. God is presented as working and revealing himself through the highs and lows of family ties. Since the Bible delves much on family relationships and values, it provides invaluable lessons for steering family conflicts towards favorable resolutions. In this article, I analyze two such family narratives to find the therapeutic strategies. The first I consider is the Joseph story in Gen 37-50; the second is the family metaphor used in prophet Hosea to restore the broken covenant relationship between Yahweh and Israel.

### **The Joseph Story (Gen 37-50)**

The Joseph Story narrates how the preferential love of Jacob, the father, caused his brothers to hate him due to jealousy. In the story, Joseph becomes the reason for the disruptions of the familial bond and its restoration. From the perspective of family relationships, we can identify two phases in this story: Joseph among his brothers in the household (beth ab) (chapter 37); the brothers with Joseph in Egypt (chapters 42-50). The first phase is about the brokenness in family ties due to various factors, and the second phase is about the restoration of the lost bond through multiple initiatives. Two attitudes of Joseph are given as the reason for kindling envy and animosity in the brothers towards him: 1) the attitude of superiority Joseph showed over the brothers in the interpretation of a dream (Gen 37:5-9). As Boadt (1997) notes, “From a psychological viewpoint, such brash dreams of power

over one's older siblings are more than sufficient grounds for a deep resentment and even hatred to develop." The abuse of the favored position he enjoyed with his father by carrying tales to him about the brothers. From the father's special attention and love towards him, Joseph has learned to feel a sense of superiority over his brothers as being the greatly favored one. The beautiful coat Jacob gives Joseph is a visible sign that the father was partial towards this son. "So bitterness begins to set in between Joseph and his brothers, bitterness as a hardened and rehearsed attitude rather than just a passing moment of anger." As a result, the text says, the brothers hated him, were jealous of him, and conspired to kill him. Though they abandoned the plan of killing him, they did separate him from his father and their homeland by selling him to foreigners. The estrangement caused by a claim of superiority on the part of Joseph and envy and hatred towards him from brothers is wide enough to eliminate him from the family network. They harbored such jealousy towards Joseph that the moment they could have Joseph alone with them, they spilt their hatred towards him: "They tore his clothes off and threw him in a pit to die." The news of Joseph's death's forged, and the deceptive story moved Jacob to inconsolable grief, thus widening the estrangement. The text communicates it vividly: "All his sons and all his daughters sought to comfort him; but he refused to be comforted, and said, 'No, I shall go down to Sheol to my son, mourning.' Thus his father bewailed him" (Gen 37: 35).

As is evident, the family ties are in disarray. In the language of psychology, relationality and well-being in the family are disrupted because of a lack of temperance in restraining emotional excess, especially the negative ones. The peace of the family is broken.

From this impasse of a broken family situation, how can restoration be possible? As Joseph's story further elucidates, restoration became a possibility. Joseph learned the art of temperance in expressing his emotions with self-control in the crucible of suffering and the arduous life experiences during his early years in Egypt. Suffering can temper one's management of emotions, it is said. From the innocent lad, brazenly guileless in describing his dreams and stranded in search of his brothers in Gen 37, Joseph grew to become a matured, self-composed, emotionally intelligent, and God-fearing adult in chapters 39-50. In chapter 39, we see a dutiful Joseph at the house of the Egyptian Potiphar. He resisted the enticements of Potiphar's wife controlled himself to maintain his decency and loyalty towards his master and

God, despite all the hardships that would accompany him, including imprisonment. Through Joseph's various experiences in Egypt, God made him prosper. Westermann's (1986) observation is apt:

This is a narrative of God's action and the comportment of a person before God taking place in simple, ordinary circumstances as daily work prospers and the friendly disposition of the authorities progresses. The prosperity is answered by competence, reliability, and unbending loyalty. These simple circumstances prepare to heal the shattered peace and save many from famine. Only one passage gives a hint at what is behind it all. Joseph must experience that God's presence does not smooth the road before him; a serious fall follows the first step upwards. The refrain "God was with Joseph" is expanded, "and God showed steadfastness to him," thus allowing us to anticipate what hardship Joseph must endure until he can say with the psalmist, "... he inclined to me and heard my cry (Ps. 40: 2[1]).

### **From Disarray to Forgiveness, Reconciliation, and Reunion**

Joseph slowly ascended to an essential and responsible role in Egypt by being blessed by God. When he is in this position of advantage, his brothers come before him, imploring his mercy to provide food for them and their father. He is now in a position to execute whatever he desires. Joseph recognizes his brothers, while his brothers do not. Joseph's attitude to them would determine the future of the fate of his brothers as they stand vulnerable before him. He can either be retaliatory like Cain to Abel or reconciliatory like Esau to Jacob. He opted for the latter response. Only an emotionally balanced person could keep Joseph's composure to his brothers as they stood before him. He could interact with them unfazed as if dealing with strangers, despite not having forgotten anything that he had experienced at the hands of these brothers. Keeping emotions and memory in control is significant in relationships. Joseph had good reasons to repudiate his brothers, to hate them, to drive them from his house and memory; for him, they represented a source of grief and evil. As Wiesel (1985) observes, the first response would be vengeance going along with that impulse. Wiesel (1985) writes:

Yet this was only a first impulse; he quickly pulled himself together: he would not be an avenger. There is a rare virtue in forgoing justified reprisals, overcoming well-founded bitterness. It is not easy to resist dealing out deserved punishment.

Instead, he begins a process that would demand painful decisions and sacrifices from the brothers before the truth is divulged, leading to forgiveness, reconciliation, and a happy reunion.

Here again, we need to distinguish between forgiveness and reconciliation. Forgiveness is something an offended person can offer the offender. Reconciliation becomes a reality when the proffered forgiveness is accepted by the other positively, who then responds dialogically, accepting and repenting their offense. Joseph did grant forgiveness to the brothers. Joseph forgave, without forgetting anything. He went to the extent of clarifying with his brothers that, though he could remember everything they did to him, still he harbored no hatred towards them. Instead, he took the initiative to talk to his panic-stricken brothers in a convincing manner to alleviate their fears of retaliation. For effecting a reconciliation, more had to be done.

### **Lessons in Conflict Resolutions**

Joseph's steps to make reconciliation with his brothers a possibility provides a good learning curve for settling disputes, feuds, and animosity in family circles, thus restoring peace and harmony.

When the brothers approached Joseph with a request for food, he remained aloof from them as if he was a stranger, though he had recognized them immediately (Gen 42). Why he adopted such a strategy is unclear. It may be that the sudden appearance of his brothers had reopened all the questions in his life that he thought were resolved. Maybe he wanted to buy time to find an adequate way to deal with the unexpected encounter. So we can presume that the seemingly harsh words and the brief period of locking them up were a ploy to take some time to plan a strategy to send them back to bring Benjamin and their father also to Egypt. As we know, it is always better to find a proper method to deal with a delicate and challenging situation, especially in family issues. In the case of Joseph and his brothers, any emotionally charged response, like blatantly accusing them or revealing his identity, could upset the brothers and destroy any plans to restore the ruptured family ties. It could lead to unexpected emotional exchanges and trauma. Joseph's strategy slowly started to evoke an awareness of remorse in the brothers for what they had done to their younger brother. Seeing their remorse for their past despicable deeds, Joseph became more emotional in his responses. Joseph decided to reveal his identity to his brothers once convinced that they were sincere in keeping their

word to their father and would not repeat the same insensitive behavior they had shown earlier in reporting deceptively about Joseph to the father. It had caused him unimaginable sorrow. The change in the brothers became clear when Joseph pretended to retain Benjamin in Egypt. The brother wanted to spare their father from feeling bereaved once again with the loss of Benjamin. They were now willing to offer themselves instead so that Benjamin would be allowed to return to their father. What a change!! Those who sold one brother out of envy and hatred and narrated a concocted story to the father, insensitively and apathetically, had now become concerned and caring for the father and their youngest brother (Gen 42-43). Brodie (2001) gives a good appraisal of Joseph's strategy of conflict resolution:

Joseph's way of dealing with his brothers may at first appear harsh or manipulative. But if he had revealed himself immediately and offered forgiveness, they would probably never again have been at ease either with themselves or with him. They would have died wondering how accurate was the forgiveness or carrying a sense of moral inferiority. Instead, through a form of "tough love," he gave them a unique opportunity: to return, in slow motion, to the situation of their crime, a chance to do things differently, and to prove to themselves and him that they had another side. As a result, when Joseph's self-revelation finally came, the way was open to complete and peaceful reconciliation.

### **Speaking to the Heart with Openness: Final Act of Reconciliation**

Joseph teaches us how to break the chain of selfishness, discord, tension, and conflict that violently attack and, at times, mortally wound its communion. His decision to forgive his brothers, in a way, breaks the natural logic of Newton's third law of action: Every action has an equal opposite reaction. Joseph's intelligent control over his emotions originated from his decision to forgive, neutralizing the principle of equal and opposite reaction of violence. This is also the power of the fear of God, as Joseph himself acknowledges.

The will to forgive leading to reconciliation reached its full realization when Joseph alleviated his brothers' fear of retaliation after the death of their father. They thought that Joseph's love and respect for the father worked as a deterrent for him to avenge their cruelties towards him. Joseph did this through genuine open dialogue with his brothers, telling them the truth he kept in his heart. He spoke with utmost clarity

and sincerity. He talked to them convincingly and sincerely. The text reads:

When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, "What if Joseph bears a grudge and wants to repay us in full for all the harm we did to him?" So they sent word to Joseph, saying, "Your father gave these instructions before he died: 'Tell Joseph this: Please forgive the sin of your brothers and the wrong they did when they treated you so badly.' Now please forgive the sin of the servants of the God of your father." When this message was reported to him, Joseph wept. Then his brothers also came and threw themselves down before him; they said, "Here we are; we are your slaves." But Joseph answered them, "Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? As for you, you meant to harm me, but God intended it for a good purpose, so he could preserve the lives of many people, as you can see this day. So have no fear; I, myself will provide for you and your little ones." In this way he reassured them, speaking kindly to them (Gen 50: 15-21).

As we study Joseph's family, the stages of the restoration of ruptured relationships are worth considering and emulating in increasingly strained contemporary family relationships due to factors like envy, hatred, selfishness, power, money, reluctance to forgive forget. As Gregory Brown delineates, "We learn a great deal from Joseph's reconciliation with his brothers after twenty-two years of being estranged."

To Pursue Reconciliation:

1. We Must Pursue Change in Ourselves and Others.
2. We Must Focus on God's Sovereignty instead of the failure of Others.
3. We Must Overcome Evil with Good
4. We Must Forgive Failures and Not Continually Bring Them Up."

A final takeaway from Joseph's family reconciliation and reunion strategy is based on the question, "Who should take the initiative in this reconciliation process?" We can infer from Joseph's approach that only the one who is in an advantageous position to offer forgiveness to the offended ones can open the road towards a reunion. Of course, the success depends on the nature of the response given by the offenders. In the case of Joseph and his brothers, Joseph's strategy worked well



towards the desired outcome. The brothers accepted the forgiveness offered, and they acknowledged their evildoing. Joseph graciously reached out to them, reinterpreting the negativity of the past in terms of positive divine intent for the future and thus preparing the ambiance for a new beginning.

### **Lessons for Family Reconciliation from Prophet Hosea**

Prophet Hosea is unique in the Bible for his use of a family metaphor to explain the reestablishment of the ruptured covenant relationship between Yahweh and Israel. He uses two critical relationships in a family: husband-wife and parent-child.

#### **Reconciliation through Proper Communication**

Hosea 2:1-14, using the metaphor of the husband-wife relationship, narrates the dynamics of the divine initiatives to bring back estranged Israel. Here, we shall consider only the relational aspects for our study and not the religious aspects. The metaphor deals with the possibilities of redeeming the family relationship jeopardized by marital infidelity. Here, failing to understand the love of her husband, the wife sought it elsewhere. The husband (referent Yahweh) initially adopted many negative interruptive tactics like blocking the way, withdrawing gifts given, even the violence of stripping her naked to check the wife's movements (referent Israel).

Nonetheless, none of them produced the expected positive impact of reminding her of the good times of their married relationship. On the contrary, they elicited the opposite result; instead of remembering, she forgot her husband. As we all know, it is very seldom that negative tactics produce the expected positive outcome. The husband intended to get the estranged wife back to him through aggressive measures without taking his wife into confidence. As a last resort, he decided to make a positive effort: "I will persuade her to the desert and speak to her tenderly" (Hos 2:14).

Persuading the estranged wife to the desert and dialoguing with her in a reconciliatory manner is an allusion to a physical distancing from the present context of distraction through other enticing attractions to regain their lost marital relationship. It would mean recontextualizing the "golden time of relationship" (Jer 2:2) through speaking to the heart of the other (Hos 2:15-23) and taking a pro-active approach. The translation "speak to her tenderly" does not fully convey the intended meaning. It is not the romantic talk of lovers. Still, a convincing dialogue

with the partner with tenderness would lead to the reestablishment of the original relationship based on the marital commitment they had undertaken. The scholarly opinion of Wolff (1974) is correct: “This expression belongs to the language of love, but does not mean fine words without an aim. It is an appeal, an attempt at a change of will. It is an invitation to a decision.” However, it does carry the nuance of love, affection, and tenderness. As Pope Francis writes in *Amoris Laetitia*, “Against this backdrop of love so central to the Christian experience of marriage and the family, another virtue stands out, one often overlooked in our world of frenetic and superficial relationships. It is tenderness” (AL 28). A quality much needed, especially in strained relationships.

As is evident from Hos 2:1-13, any non-communicative strategy of repairing the damaged relationship will further widen the gap of forgetting and distancing. Any intervening measures without involving the other will lead to further estrangement, while a resolution concerning the disgruntled other will lead to restoration. Problem-solving is a two-way process. One has to convince the other of the sincerity of your intentions. As *Amoris Laetitia* states, “To be open to a genuine encounter with others, ‘a kind look’ is essential. This is incompatible with a negative attitude that readily points out other people’s shortcomings while overlooking one’s own. A kind look helps us to see beyond our limitations, to be patient and to cooperate with others, despite our differences” (AL 100).

The power of creative mediation is described in Hos 2:14-23. In Hos 2:14, we see the changed positive strategy of seeking together a remedy for the impasse in the relationship by speaking to the heart of the estranged partner. It led to the restoration of the ruptured relationship. A new possibility is open in the form of a renewed commitment to abandon waywardness and recommit to the family bond.

### **Suffering of a Parent in Saving a Rebellious Child**

Parents are complaining more and more about dealing with children showing rebellious and dissident behavior. The influence of online mass media, peer influence, and other enticements take children away from parental care and control much too soon. Many parents struggle to cope with this problem, and at times, they stand helpless. Hos Chapter 11 depicts such a scenario. This chapter delineates the love and concern with which God, the parent, nurtures baby Israel through

various developmental stages and the somewhat negative responses of the child. The profundity of parental tenderness is well-scripted in the prophetic words: “When Israel was a child, I loved him... I took them up in my arms... I led them with cords of compassion, with the bands of love, and I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks. I bent down to them and fed them” (Hos 11:1, 3-4). But as the child grew up, it developed a vicious habit of turning away from the parent (Hos 11:7). In Hos 11:8-9, Hosea speaks of restoring the ruptured Yahweh-Israel relationship, using the parent-child metaphor. The rebellious child created an impasse in the parent-child relationship by abandoning him and going after other harmful and morally depraved influences. Here, restoration is possible only by an interruption of the impasse. If not for the intervention of a benevolent parent to help him out of this inclination, the child would perish.

In verses 8-9, Hosea presents the pathos of God trying to find a creative strategy that would mend their relationship. Yahweh, the parent, had two options available: either to take the legal route of expelling the rebellious child from the household (Deut 21:18-21) or to find a way out to save Israel from their misguided inclinations. Uniquely, God finds an answer within Himself that manifests God’s sovereignty, not in judgment and punishment but mercy. God can interrupt the inclination of human disobedience through His mercy.

How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel?

How can I make you like Admah? How can I treat you like Zeboiim?

My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender.

I will not execute my fierce anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim;

for I am God and no mortal, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath (Hos 11:8-9).

The strategy of resolving the impasse created by human frailties through divine pathos can be considered the divine strategy of creative involvement towards restoration. Heschel (1962) explains this pathos as living care, an outgoing challenge, and dynamic relation between God and man. While passion is devoid of reason, pathos is “an act formed with intention, depending on free will, the result of decision

and determination,” which helps restrain negative emotions. It is never self-centered but directed outward.

Of course, the prophet narrates the divine strategy of resolving the break-up in the divine-human relationship. However, analogically, we can apply the technique in rectifying human relationships too.

The text permits us to draw a good strategy for resolving family problems, especially with adolescents and youth in decision-making and path-finding crises. Instead of giving into rash and impulsive anger in responding to children in situations narrated above, we need to take time. It may be a time of inner tension, concern for an amicable and lasting resolution that enables children to make decisions for themselves. Even when they retort angrily and contemptuously, compassionate and positive responses to children may make them reflect on their behavior sooner than later. In true-life situations, the pathos of God becomes real. Parents have a feeling of betrayal, rejection, and misunderstanding on the one hand. On the other hand, their inability to leave their children to suffer the fruits of their misdeeds. Hosea says, “their bowels recoil”: an expression that shows the emotional turmoil in making existential decisions.

### **Conclusion**

I have attempted to delineate some Biblical models and resources for developing a tool for family therapy to effect reconciliation to restore a ruptured relationship. As *Amoris Laetitia* vividly points out, since so many factors threaten the stability of the family, it is essential to have tools “to offer guidance and counseling in areas related to growth in love, overcoming conflict and raising children” (*AL* 38). The document stresses the importance of forgiveness in keeping the family bond safe. Forgiveness is rooted in a positive attitude that seeks to understand other people’s weaknesses and tolerate them (*AL* 105). As the Joseph Story and the Family Metaphor in Hosea show, there are ways to work out forgiveness and reconciliation to hold families together.

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# Conscientious Parenting for the Moral Development of a Child

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## Abstract

Families play an essential role in society. Parents are responsible for the growth and healthy development of faith and morality in their children. It is necessary to understand some of the pre-existing childhood concepts in India when dealing with children as these concepts have strong local, cultural and religious meanings and impact Indian Catholic's understandings of family and marriage. The Church calls for conscious parenting that includes faith. A high level of morality and positive behaviors in parents can result in children having higher levels of moral internalization and positive behavioral outcomes. The growth of the child requires a daily commitment to conscientious parenting. It is a journey of trust, and the more parents trust, the less anxiety they will have about their children's future and thus enable their child's healthy development.

*Keywords:* Parenting, Conscientious, Moral Development

## Introduction

Families play an essential role in society. They are the domestic Church. Parents are responsible for the growth and development of faith and morality in the family, which reflects in the community. The contexts in which children live and grow could be divergent and complex. Some reasons are different languages, religions, cultures, economies, and geographies. India is one such country that is highly

divergent and complex. Therefore, based on these factors, children's status, roles, and issues are different. It is essential to understand some of the pre-existing childhood concepts in India when dealing with children, as these concepts have strong local, cultural, and religious meanings (Phillips, 2015). These meanings impact Indian Catholics' understandings concerning family and marriage. To ensure success in marriage and to have a happy family, the Catholic Church has developed a comprehensive view of marriage and family for Catholics all over the world (Coelho, 2013).

In India, traditional systems survived for centuries without significant changes. However, with the advent of the British, industrialization, modernization, and the recent globalization trends, the structural features and functional implications of the family started changing (Savarimuthu, 2009). This is seen particularly in today's emerging new middle class (Patole, 2018). Faith and morality, which were very important in the cultures and religions of India, also began to change. A conscientious parent looks to the overall development of their child. It implies not applying the same parenting methods to different children, as each child grows differently. Love for the difference is expected, and love, in general, is the most important motivating factor.

### **Characteristics of a Conscientious Parent**

The role models of children at home and socially are their parents. Parents or caregivers who play this vital role need to display integrity and love in all their activities, especially in interpersonal and social activities with their children. Role models are essential for growing children. The display of a lack of morals in parents or caregivers can create vulnerability, and intimacy deficits in a growing child, resulting in distorted beliefs regarding self, others, and relationships. Therefore, the teaching and demonstration of the proper morality should focus right from the early years of a child's development. Children and the young need to understand moral values to embrace them with more profound knowledge and love of God (*Gravissimum Educationis*, 7). Good parenting in which love is shown is essential to prevent maladaptive coping strategies at challenging moments in life.

Children look for integrity in their parents. Integrity is the "firm adherence to a code of especially moral or artistic values" (Merriam-Webster, 2020). It is also known as uprightness of character. An upright person knows how to choose between what is right and what is wrong.

Integrity or uprightness of character is looked for in all walks of life, at home and workplace. Parents model uprightness for their children. A lack of uprightness of character tarnishes the image of the person. The catechism teaches Catholic children about what is right and wrong. Their understandings will continue till death.

Therefore children and young people must be helped, with the aid of the latest advances in psychology and the arts and science of teaching, to develop harmoniously their physical, moral, and intellectual endowments so that they may gradually acquire a mature sense of responsibility in striving endlessly to form their own lives properly and in pursuing true freedom as they surmount the vicissitudes of life with courage and constancy (*Gravissimum Educationis*, 7).

Many parents believe that they are selfless in bringing up their children. They should set aside their beliefs about raising their children as they please and instead look for the best information available to help them with this challenging task. Parenting is most effective when parents concentrate on themselves rather than only their children to get the best results (Tsabary, 1972). All family members should be involved to have meaningful outcomes for the entire family (Rosenberg & Wilcox, 2006).

Most societies and communities in the world have strictures sanctioned by religion and culture, and failure to abide can result in exclusion. India's socio-cultural parenting practices include parental authority, respect, and caring; children's obligation to parents and families; development stage and gender-based obligations, attitudes, and behaviors. These socio-cultural practices sometimes override legal commitments and also apply to Indian Catholics. Since the emergence of human rights and child rights, some of these traditional practices have become understood as wrong and demand counter-cultural responses. These deviant practices include female infanticide, child sexual abuse, joint families, forced marriages, dowry, child labor, and child trafficking (Phillips, 2015).

### **The Duties and Rights of Parents**

Parents have the primary and inalienable right and duty to educate their children and to educate them to choose according to their conscience (*Gravissimum Educationis*, 20). Parents teach their children integrity and use their skills in the service of others (*Gaudete Et Exsultate*, 130). This happens through small gestures. Parents talk with their children



about their hopes and dreams with patience and love (*Gaudete Et Exsultate*, 16). When hard times come, parents adapt so that the child knows that they are loved. This brings joy, deep security, serene hope, and spiritual fulfillment to the child (*Gaudete Et Exsultate*, 125). The father and the mother are important influences on a child. The quality of their relationship largely influences their relationship with their child.

A father who has a good relationship with the mother of their children is more likely to be involved and spend time with their children and have children who are psychologically and emotionally healthier. Similarly, a mother who feels affirmed by her children's father and who enjoys the benefits of a happy relationship is more likely to be a better mother. Indeed, the quality of the relationship affects the parenting behavior of both parents. They are more responsive, affectionate, and confident with their infants, more self-controlled in dealing with defiant toddlers, and better confidants for teenagers seeking advice and emotional support (Rosenberg & Wilcox, 2006).

Love is undoubtedly the bonding element in families. If something negative affected the parents in the past, demonstrable love between the parents would assure the children and help create a strong connection. This is the reason why selfless, parental love defies boundaries, why children are loyal to their parents, and that there is a willingness on the part of parents to sacrifice themselves for their children and vice versa (Tsabary, 1972).

Obedient children are considered good children. They are deemed well-mannered, obedient, and studious, can sit still and pay attention. Very often, a child's "goodness" is measured by how the child's behavior fits into the life of an adult. Parents and society naturally gravitate to those children who don't challenge their ingrained beliefs (Tsabary, 1972). In contrast, "bad" children are considered hyperactive, distracted, loud, and often defiant. Parents often react when their child's behavior fails to honor their agenda or disrupts their sense of order. Just as respect, caring, and kindness are passed on through the generation, child maltreatment and domestic abuse can be passed on from one generation to the next (Rosenberg & Wilcox, 2006). Child sexual abuse (CSA) is one such deviancy and mostly happens in families, as is borne out in most research.

## **Role of Parents**

In India, if there are more children, the family is considered happy and prosperous. The preference for the boy child has given rise to many deviant practices in villages, towns, and cities of India. In recent years, there has been a focus on individualism that disregards traditional values on marriage and family, where married couples of those cohabiting consider children as liabilities. Also, many parents in India, including Christians, have opted to have a single child. Such practices have reconfigured traditional kinship structures (Phillips, 2015). With the emerging new middle class where there is less structure, it is crucial for family development and critical for the wellbeing of the society that morals, values, and the parents' integrity remain intact as it is a fundamental and vital component of Indian culture (Patole, 2018).

Parents need to be nurturers. Parents respond to the child's needs for emotional security, such as providing warmth and sensitivity within the relationship by being nurturers. This is broken when there is any abuse. A nurturing parent sets boundaries and guides the child by modeling positive behaviors without physical or psychological coercion. It also addresses recognizing the child's need to be respected and acknowledged and fosters the potential for mutual understanding and influence to develop. Parents need to adjust to the changing developmental tasks of children as they grow older (Devi, 2014). Parents should refrain from abusive behaviors and see that their child is safe.

## **Child Abuse in Families**

In families, it is crucial to ensure sensitivity to cultural practices while at the same time observing the needs of children within a child-protection framework. Parental culpability is an issue in child abuse and CSA. Inappropriate standards of care may be due to ignorance, religious beliefs, poverty, mental illness, and availability of and access to resources; as such, poor childcare may occur by default or omission (Sanderson, 2006). In India, this often happens because of power dynamics, dependencies, and the non-functionality of governmental resources to adequately address this issue. The powerlessness inherent in abuse and CSA is due to the abuse of power and control.

This can result in the adult survivor experiencing a sense of powerlessness in all areas of his life and may not access inner resources of power for fear of abusing it or resembling the abuser. In contrast, some survivors overcompensate for their sense of

powerlessness by believing themselves to be all-powerful and invincible. This is frequently a reaction to disintegration anxiety (Sanderson, 2006).

There might be fear of intimacy and an inability to trust survivors. This can manifest in difficulties in social relationships and relationships with the survivor's children or parents. A history of CSA can impact a survivor's parenting ability. Many survivors fear becoming a parent if they cannot protect their children from CSA or become too enmeshed. Some adult survivors become overprotective of their children, especially children of the same sex as themselves, by seeing them through the eyes of an abuser. They cannot allow the children to separate or equip them with appropriate knowledge, social skills, or safety strategies (Sanderson, 2006).

### **Role of Parents in Moral Education**

The family is the first school of social virtues in society. In Christian families enriched by the grace and office of the sacrament of matrimony, children should learn to know God according to the faith they received in Baptism. This is how they experience family, society, and the Church. The Christian family is vital for the progress of God's people. Children are gradually led to a companionship with their fellowmen and with the people of God through their families (*Gravissimum Educationis*, 12).

The Holy Family – Joseph, Mary, and Joseph are the first family for all Christians to emulate. Simeon and Anna met Mary and Joseph and acknowledged Jesus as the Messiah (cf. Lk 2:22-38). Simeon praised God that he had finally “seen” salvation when he lifted Jesus in his arms. Anna spoke to everyone about the Baby. This is a beautiful image of two older people and two young parents, brought together by Jesus. Families share many beautiful moments: meals, rest, housework, leisure, prayer, trips, pilgrimages, and times of mutual support. This has to be necessitated through the authentic love that comes from Jesus. He brings together and unites peoples through the generations, thus helping overcome self-absorption, solitude, and sadness. He is the Bread of life that sustains his followers on their journey by illuminating their paths (Francis, 2014).

Just like Mary and Joseph did for Jesus, parents in the family have the primary duty of imparting education to the child. Parents entrust a share in the work of education to others, like those in civil society, but they are the primary and principal educators (*Gravissimum Educationis*,

11). This role is so essential that it can be supplied where it is lacking with difficulty. Abuse often leaves a child wondering about their losses. Abuse is carried through every stage of development. Parents should create a family atmosphere animated by love and respect for God and man, in which a well-rounded child's growth is fostered. Therefore, there cannot be any abuse.

### **The Church's Role**

The Church understands the need to care for all its children's moral and religious education. She provides this through witnessing the lives of those who teach – laity and clergy and religious (*Gravissimum Educationis*, 23).

The Church reminds parents of the duty that is theirs to arrange and even demand that their children be able to enjoy these aids and advance in their Christian formation to a degree that is abreast of their development in secular subjects. Therefore the Church esteems highly those civil authorities and societies which, bearing in mind the pluralism of contemporary society and respecting religious freedom, assist families so that the education of their children can be imparted in all schools according to the individual moral and religious principles of the families (*Gravissimum Educationis*, 24).

There is, therefore, an invitation to Christian families to value the gifts of marriage and the family. Through difficulties, the Christian family is encouraged to persevere in a love strengthened by the virtues of generosity, commitment, fidelity. The Church encourages all Christians to be signs of closeness, patience, and mercy, wherever family life remains imperfect or lacks peace and joy (*Amoris Lætitia*, 5).

### **Child Sexual Abuse: Awareness and Prevention**

Children involved with their parents from birth are more likely to be emotionally secure and confident to explore their surroundings. As they grow older, they have better social connections with peers. These children are also less likely to get in trouble at home, school, or the neighborhood (Rosenberg & Bradford, 2006). The physical and psychological abuse of preschoolers and school-aged children is associated with depression, low self-esteem, antisocial behavior, juvenile delinquency, and adult criminal behavior. Sexual abuse is associated with depression, substance abuse, eating disorders, suicidal behavior, and promiscuity. Neglect is related to the failure to thrive

and is also linked to attachment disorders, aggression, and difficulty dealing with others (Rosenberg & Bradford, 2006). If the child has been sexually abused, there is guilt, embarrassment, and shame. Abuse compromises the child's belief that the world is safe as it has not been safe for that child (Moffatt, 2003). Children are sexually abused, innocence, dignity, and control.

Sexual abuse treatment must address these losses; therefore, a therapist must provide a way for these children to regain their dignity and control and also to empower them as they face future discouragements and setbacks that are a natural part of life. Second, the child must be allowed to mourn his losses. Innocence, for example, can never be recovered. Grieving involves acknowledging the loss and learning how to cope with and overcome it. Third, the child must find a way to conquer the perpetrator. Finally, the child must regain control of his environment. This involves teaching the child to use his available skills or teaching the child new skills that are needed for recovery. Stories of survival and good decisions that one has made and books or videos about trauma and recovery are all tools that can empower a child, leading to the achievement of the goals of therapy (Moffatt, 2003).

Resiliency is crucial in children. Victims of abuse who are older children are more likely to recover than children abused when they are very young. The quicker an intervention occurs, including removing the child from the dysfunctional home and reestablishing healthy relationships elsewhere, the better the prognosis. Also, children who have strong relationships outside the family are more likely to cope with their abuse healthily. The most immediate settings containing the developing child and the cultural beliefs and values that influence the child need to be addressed. Parents are an integral part of the prevention process. Primary prevention efforts can prevent the sexual victimization of the most vulnerable members of society. This helps to achieve the overall objective of eliminating this serious public health problem. Therefore, they should be part of this process (Wurtele & Kenny, 2012). Where there is child sexual abuse, change can be envisioned when the social conscience is awakened to cruel events. Change in mindsets and laws that work allow children to blossom and experience the joys of childhood (Karthiga, Tamilselvi, & Ravikumar, 2014).

## **Developmental Programs and Interventions**

Adults in a family, Church, or religious institution influence the lives of children in the contemporary context, whether in India or any part of the world. For Christians, the Church is also an important agent to help children. In India, the caretakers of children are parents, family, and the community. Vulnerable children need help for their development and need more protection and care. Therefore, the family, Church, and State should all be involved in child welfare and protection. A child's natural environment is the family, but if the family is at risk, then interventions need to be made not only for the child but also for the family (Phillips, 2015). For prevention, developmental and early intervention programs that are known to reduce general crime rates are equally effective in reducing sexual crime (Smallbone & Wortley, 2001).

In families and communities, interventions in multiple spheres may help mitigate risks for antisocial behavior (Ling, Umbach, & Raine, 2019). For offenders, treatments should be designed to address the issues associated with behavioral, psychophysiological differences, those that can target symptoms. Studies of mindfulness have suggested its utility in improving autonomic functioning and emotion regulation, which may help individuals with reactive aggression and hyperarousal. Emotional intelligence training programs have shown some promise in reducing aggression and increasing empathy among adolescents, increasing emotional intelligence among adults, and can help in working with disruptive children and improving parenting skills.

Early adversity and childhood maltreatment have been significant risks in developing neurobiological and behavioral problems. Nutrition research has supported several areas to target concerning healthy neurodevelopment, and they show some promise in reducing antisocial and criminal behavior (Ling, Umbach, & Raine, 2019). A healthy social environment is crucial for normative brain development and function. Knowing the social context could help buffer biological risks, and it is suggested that changing an individual's environment could mitigate biological criminogenic risk. Social interventions for individuals at higher biological risk for antisocial behavior aim to provide an enriched environment. This is beneficial for all.

Risk management models teach offenders or potential offenders skills to avoid high-risk situations. The focus of treatment for offenders should be to equip them with the knowledge, skills, and opportunities

to achieve needs of intimacy, and sexuality, in an acceptable manner (Simonsa, Wurteleb, & Durhamb, 2008). Primary prevention efforts are aimed at the general population to stop childhood sexual abuse before it occurs. Regardless of risk status, services should be offered to everyone. Primary prevention includes modifying conditions in the environment that promote or support the sexual victimization of children (Wurtele & Kenny, 2012).

Most child-focused personal safety programs share common goals, including (a) helping children recognize unsafe situations or potential abusers; (b) teaching children to refuse inappropriate requests by saying no verbally; (c) encouraging children to resist by removing themselves from the potential perpetrator physically; (d) encouraging children to report previous or ongoing abuse to a trusted authority figure; and (e) helping children understand that the secret or inappropriate touching is never the child's fault—it's always the abuser's responsibility (Wurtele & Kenny, 2012).

For Christians, children have dignity because they reflect the image of God. It is about empowering children and parents with their rights in society and community. Is it about restoring the corrupted image of God and reconciling children to God's abundant life (Phillips, 2015)?

## **Conclusion**

In India, the institution of family is taking on different forms due to alterations in its emerging socio-cultural fabric. These are more manifest in the urbanized and educated sections and are also in small ways in rural areas. Proper attentiveness needs to be given to these changes, impacting faith and religion. If not, there might occur dislocations of systems, ultimately leading to structural disintegration (Savarimuthu, 2009). The Church encourages the striving to excel in the pursuit of knowledge to preserve and enhance its beneficent influence upon today's world. This is important for the healthy development of people of faiths. It calls for conscious parenting concerning the faith. Therefore, parents need to mirror a high level of morality and positive behaviors. This results in higher levels of moral internalization and positive behavioral outcomes for children. It is the essence of the profound journey of parenting (Tsabary, 1972). Conscientious parenting is a daily commitment to the process of growth in a child. It is a journey of trust, and the more parents trust, the less anxiety they will have about their children's future and thus enable their child's healthy development.

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## Role and Authority of the Spiritual Father in the Eastern Christian Monastic Tradition

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### Abstract

Spiritual direction and spiritual fathers/mothers are essential parts of monastic tradition from the beginning of monasticism in the East. All authority in the Church are from God for the service of the faithful, to lead them back to God in the process of divinization (*theosis*). While spiritual father represents the charismatic and prophetic authority the bishop (and partially the monastic superior) represents the formal (and sacramental) authority in the Church. The role of the spiritual father is to help the spiritual children on the way of their spiritual journey. Most importantly, as per this article, he is helping his spiritual children in discernment (of the spirits) on the way of Christian perfection. At the same time, he is doing this with humility and love with wisdom and knowledge. Most importantly spiritual father's life is the message to the disciple. He is not mere teacher but represents Christ himself to the spiritual children.

*Keywords:* Eastern Christian Monastic Tradition, Spiritual Father, Spiritual Authority, Spiritual Direction, Spiritual Discernment

### Introduction

Spiritual direction and spiritual fathers (and mothers)<sup>1</sup> are as old as the monastic<sup>2</sup> way of life in the Christian tradition. This does not mean

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<sup>1</sup> Though in the following pages we use exclusive language for convenience most of the things we discuss about spiritual fathers (*abbas*) shall be applicable also to spiritual mothers (*ammās*), and spiritual sons to spiritual daughters.

<sup>2</sup> The word 'monastic' is used here in the wider sense of the consecrated life in the Christian tradition. For example the early desert fathers in the narrow sense cannot be considered 'monastic.'

that this spiritual ministry and experts guiding the persons in their spiritual life-journey were not there before the monastic foundations. This concept of spiritual guidance was there even in other pre-Christian religious traditions. For example in the Hindu religious tradition the concept of *guru*<sup>3</sup> has many common grounds with the Christian spiritual father and direction, though there are substantial differences in the understanding of attaining salvation.

We can see many elements of spiritual begetting and guidance in the New Testament and in early Church fathers. Jesus can be considered the spiritual director par excellence by directing his disciples to the Father in the way of perfection in the Spirit. Paul is another example who says that “until Christ formed in you I am in child-birth pangs” (Gal 4:19).

According to Thomas Merton, a modern contemplative and spiritual master, spiritual direction “is a continuous process of formation and guidance, in which a Christian is led and encouraged in his special vocation, so that by faithful correspondence to the graces of the Holy Spirit he may attain to the particular end of his vocation and to union with God ... Spiritual direction was, then, one of the essential means to monastic perfection” (Merton, 1960, p.13-14). In this article we mostly discuss spiritual father and spiritual direction in the background of early Eastern Christian monastic tradition and spirituality, though most part of them applicable to any Christian.

### **Spiritual Authority in the Church**

Spiritual authority is the authority that makes or facilitates or supports the union of a person with the Divine (Baier, 2010). In the Christian tradition we call the ultimate Divine reality as the Trinitarian Divinity, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Communion with this Trinitarian Divinity is the final goal of humankind and the cosmos/creation. It is happening in and through the economy of Christ and the Holy Spirit in the Church. One who facilitates this in the Church is the spiritual authority.

All authority in the Church is coming from God. As Paul says, “there is no authority except from God and those authorities that exists have been instituted by God” (Rom 13:1). The authority in the Church is the

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<sup>3</sup> One of the meanings of this Sanskrit word is the “one who dispels darkness of ignorance.” *Guru Gita* [Long Version], 44: गुकारश्चान्धकारो हि रुकारस्तेज उच्यते । अज्ञानग्रासकं ब्रह्म गुरुरेव न संशयः ॥

authority of God the Father that is transmitted to the Church through the Son. And every paternity is from God the Father as Paul says in the Letter to the Ephesians (3:14-15): “For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every fatherhood in heaven and on earth takes its name.” So the Church understands the authority in the Church is from God and it is not for domination but for service in charity to lead the flock to the true authority, the Father. Christ himself is the best model for this authority.

**Bishop.** In the Church the bishop (*episcopoi*) is considered as the embodiment of divine authority and fatherhood, transmitted through Christ and then the apostles. This is very clear to the Christians of early centuries. That is why the *Didascalia Apostolorum* clearly says: “He [bishop] it is who ministers the word to you and is your mediator, your teacher, and *after God, is your father who has regenerated you through the water*” (Stewart-Syker, 2009, p.150-52) According to Thomas Merton “the bishop, the living and visible representative of the apostles who had founded the local Church, spoke for Christ and apostles, and, helped by his presbyters, took care of all the spiritual needs of his flock. The individual member of the community was “formed” and “guided” by his participation in the life of the community, and such instruction as was needed was given first of all by the bishop and presbyters, and then, through informal admonitions, by one’s parents, spouse, friends, and fellow Christians.” (Merton, 1960:11-12) He is the formal spiritual father because his fatherhood and authority are related to the very spiritual birth of a person in the Church through Baptism. This spiritual birth in the Church is sealed by the bishop—in the Roman tradition by giving the Sacrament of Confirmation by himself and in the Eastern Christian tradition through sealing the person in the Sacrament of Chrismation (in the form of the cross) using the very oil (*Myron/Chrism*) consecrated by the bishop.

**Monastic Superior (Abbot/Prior).** Monastic superior (*hegumen/resha d-dayra*) was the immediate spiritual father in the cenobitic life style in the beginning. Though monasticism started away from the world<sup>4</sup> it is not a revolt against the society as such. It was started in the Egyptian deserts as a revolt against the wealth and power hierarchies of the society.

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<sup>4</sup> This we are saying about Egyptian monasticism. The Proto-monasticism in the Syriac tradition, also started almost at the same time or even before that of the Egyptian monasticism, existed with the ecclesial communities and not away from it.

The Desert Fathers declined to be ruled by men, but had no desire to rule over others themselves. Nor did they fly from human fellowship- the very fact that they uttered these “words” of advice to one another is proof that they were eminently social. The society they sought was one where all men were truly equal, where the only authority under God was the charismatic authority of wisdom, experience and love. Of course, they acknowledged the benevolent, hierarchical authority of their bishops: but the bishops were far away and said little about what went on in the desert until the great Origenist conflict at the end of the fourth century (Merton, 1900, p.5).

So, equality was the benchmark of this movement. Still it keeps this character somewhat aloof from the worldly power systems. In the context of cenobitic monasticism the role of monastic authority is important. So (monastic) superiors in these communities are charismatic leaders or those elected from the equals to minister the community. Their authority is rather spiritual and charismatic, at the same time slowly in the course of time became somewhat formal.

**Spiritual Father.** In the early days of monasticism, especially among the cenobites, generally the superior and the spiritual father were same. At the same time we can see independent spiritual fathers from the beginning itself. Among the anchorites this was very common. Antony, though he was not a formal *hegumen*, was spiritual guide and father for many, both in the desert and those from outside (*Vita Antonii*, ch. 15). The Semitic word “abba” is the common term used in the ancient times, other words like *gerōn* in Greek, *staretz* (Mcdowell, 2011, p.218-20) in Slavic languages also used to denote the elder.

In the NT the term “abba” is used for God the Father and, as we have seen, in Christian understanding all fatherhood comes from this source (cf. Eph 3:15). As the ‘monastic profession’ was considered as a second baptism the spiritual father (abbot/novice master) can be considered as a second father in the spiritual milieu (Hausherr, 1990, p.23-24). ‘Abba’ is the word used in the early ascetic literature and monastic tradition for spiritual father both in the eremitic and cenobitic traditions. The words ‘abbot’ and ‘abbey’ comes from the same root. In its original meaning the word *abba* is the one who “had the necessary qualities to bring forth disciples to the spiritual life, to rear them and guide them to perfection” (Hausherr, 1990, p.29). For a novice in the early monasticism “the spiritual father replaced the bishop and presbyter as representative of Christ. And yet there was a difference because there

was nothing hierarchical about his function. It was purely and simple charismatic. It was sanctioned by the father's own personal holiness. The greatest 'abbots' in the Egyptian and Syrian deserts were generally not priests" (Merton, 1960, p.12-13).

### **Spiritual Fatherhood in the Eastern Christian Tradition**

Spiritual fatherhood and spiritual direction are very part of eastern Christian monastic tradition from the beginning up to now. Its history, concept and practice will help us to have a clear picture of this spiritual ministry in the Church.

**History and Models.** This spiritual tradition has the same history of the monastic tradition in the East. Great personalities in the history of monasticism, both anchoritic and cenobitic traditions, from Antony of Egypt onwards, were spiritual fathers. *Vita Antonii* and the *Apophthegmata Patrum* amply prove this claim. Pachomius and his successors in the Pachomian Koinonia are great mentors of souls. On Pachomius it is said, in *The First Sahidic Life of Pachomius*, that "he very carefully fashioned the brothers' souls" (Veilleux, 1980, p.440). In the early times the monastic superior himself was the spiritual guide. "The earliest sources for cenobitic monasticism also emphasize the efforts of the community's director to offer counseling to every individual in the community. Thus, Pachomius is said to have toured the cells of individual monks, 'examining the brothers, and correcting the thoughts of each one'" (Dilley, 2017, p.5). He even trained his beloved disciple Theodore in this art. Though Basil's rules do not directly mention about a separate spiritual father he also speaks about the "care of souls" (Long Rule 33; Silvas, 2005). Climacus speaks about the protective prayer of the spiritual father as a saving helmet for their disciples (*The Ladder of Divine Ascent* 4.2.). In the Syriac tradition many of the writings of famous spiritual writers including Aphrahat (especially his 6th demonstration), Ephrem, Joseph Hazzaya, Isaac of Nineveh etc. and writings such as *The Book of Steps (Liber Graduum)* were spiritual conferences given to the seekers of spiritual wisdom and direction.

The *Philokalia* is a goldmine of teachings on spiritual direction by different spiritual authors. For example St. Neilos the Ascetic, lived in the 5<sup>th</sup> century and is the earliest writer refer explicitly on Jesus Prayer, elaborately discuss on the spiritual direction in his Ascetic Discourse (Palmer, Sherrard and Ware, 1979, p.215-228). Symeon the New

Theologian (c. 917-987), a later spiritual writer exhorts the spiritual seeker to see Christ himself in his spiritual father:

Whoever possesses unclouded faith in his spiritual father will, on seeing him, think that he is seeing Christ Himself; when with him or following him, he will firmly believe that he is with and following Christ. Such a person will never want to associate with anyone else, nor will he value anything in the world more than his thought of him and his love for him (Palmer, Sherrard and Ware, 1995, p.28).

Seraphim of Sarov (1759-1833) was a holy *staretz* who guided many in Russia at his time. Paisios (in Mount Athos), an elder died in 1994, was considered a great spiritual father in the Greek Orthodox tradition in recent times. (Farasiotis, 2008; Markides, 2001) Many of the Russian literature, especially of Fyodor Dostoevsky and Leo Tolstoy (Kolstø, 2008) were much influenced by this tradition of spiritual eldership. For example Father Zosima, the Elder/*staretz* in Fyodor Dostoevsky's novel *The Brothers of Karamazov* is an embodiment of the concept of a modern spiritual father in the Eastern Christian tradition. According to it "a starets is one who subsumes your soul, your will, into his soul and into his will. When a starets accepts you, you renounce your own will and surrender to him in total obedience, total self-abnegation" (Dostoevsky, 1994) – a true description of spiritual father-son relationship in the East.

**Concept.** Christian life is a life in Christ transformed from "worldly" and "somatic" centred life by the power of the Holy Spirit. In the Eastern Christian tradition this transformation in Christ look towards deification (*theosis*). This Christic transformation (Pallikunnel, 2021) or way can be considered as a spiritual movement/progress from lower (bodily) level to the higher spiritual levels. Discernment of spirits is very important in this path of spiritual progress. Those who pursue this path knows that "one cannot reach spiritual perfection by oneself, but needs guidance from an experienced person, who has walked that path and knows its pitfalls and difficulties" (Hämmerli, 2014, p.152-53). Asceticism and spiritual exercises are part of this movement. Learned and experienced masters can guide the "novices" in this way of spiritual progress. So, as Nouwen says, "the goal of spiritual direction is spiritual formation—the ever-increasing capacity to live a spiritual life from the heart. A spiritual life cannot be formed without discipline, practice, and accountability" (Nouwen, 2006).

This process has two sides: Divine and human. Early spiritual fathers are very much aware of this. They considered themselves as weak instruments in the hands of God to direct their fellow men in the path of divine life. At the same time they clearly understood that “it was neither the abba’s counsel nor the ascetic’s efforts alone or in concert that was responsible for his triumph. Rather, it was “God working in him,” that is, the intercession and manifestation of the divine presence that effected transformation” (McNary-Zak, 2005, p.110). The spiritual father becomes a channel of God’s grace in this process.

**Practice.** The spiritual father is often considered as a charismatic figure and each spiritual child is unique and so the practice of spiritual direction has no specific form. It may vary according to the spiritual father and the spiritual child. Generally in the monastic tradition “the mention of spiritual fatherhood is often linked to the memory of one’s reception into the religious or spiritual life” (Hausherr, 1990, 25).

From the beginning of monasticism we can see this spiritual tradition. Desert fathers are best example of this practice:

In the *Apophthegmata Patrum*, for example, men anxious to make progress in asceticism, or to become disciples in a more formal sense, ask acknowledged masters of the spiritual life questions of the greatest simplicity, reflecting their confidence that virtually anything their  $\alpha\beta\beta\alpha\varsigma$ , or ‘father,’ might say would be to their advantage. *Εἰπε μοι λόγον* was their traditional request: ‘Speak to me; some word, some phrase.’ They refused to restrict the father’s reply, either by the shortcomings of their own self-knowledge, or by the limits of any particular difficulty. They asked questions that were also of considerable scope—‘How may I be saved?’—trusting that the dialogue to follow would answer their deepest need (Rousseau, 2010, p.19).

They are not asking instructions merely on general matters of spiritual life but also about particular courses of action because they believe that these elders who were men of insight and wisdom can help them with suitable solutions for their personal problems (Rousseau, 2010). This is not merely teaching practical things. “It was the person’s experience as a whole which became the very content of dialogue with the director. As one was led toward a deeper communion with God, there was always a focus on what was operational within oneself—the perceptions of heart and mind—and between oneself and God and his or her fellows—behavioural concerns” (Allen, 1994, p.5). At the same



time “the relationship is seen as a form of training through obedience on which a disciple’s attainment of the virtues and qualities which are the aim of the monastic life was directly dependent and which directly affects his standing before God as well” (Gould, 1993, p.27). These can be applied not only to eremitical but cenobitical monasticism. “The care of souls in cenobitic monasticism was an elaborate process of instruction, discipline, and ritual with the goal of salvation, which placed leaders and disciples in a reciprocal relationship of obligations” (Dilley, 2017, p.3).

### **Spiritual Direction, Sacramental Confession and Counselling.**

Some, even those who are learned and in authority, understand them as same. Though these three overlap at times they are different and their purposes are also different. In the monastic tradition human being is not at the centre and scale of measure of everything, but God. At the same time human being has a definitive plan in the divine economy of salvation. This often contradicts the modern anthropocentric world-vision that gave birth to the Freudian and Marxian understanding of human being and this world.

In the Confession the emphasis is on the sacramental healing and forgiveness of God. In many ways it overlap with the spiritual direction. So we can see some confusion even in some of the writings of spiritual authors of Eastern Christian tradition. But according to Hausherr “what the ‘spiritual children’ asked of their fathers in God was not the removal of a past sin through an act of authority, but the means to avoid it better in the future” (Hausherr, 1990, p.102). So we shall distinguish between “the accusation of sins with a view to absolution, and the ‘revelation of thoughts’ with a view to direction to be received” (Hausherr, 1990, p.99). And we shall also remember that in the Eastern Christian tradition most of the spiritual fathers are not persons in the holy orders as in the Western Christian tradition.

In the psychological counselling the emphasis is on the emotional healing and mental health and by that the wellbeing of the person. Generally here human being is the centre (anthropocentric), God and religion has not much role in it. On the other hand in spiritual direction (and also in the Sacramental Confession) the centre point is God and his salvific mystery. At the same time some psychological and spiritual problems are connected as the same way as some psycho-somatic illnesses then a psychotherapy based on Christian anthropology can be useful for the healing (Getcha, 2007, p.218).

## **Spiritual Father and the Spiritual Discernment**

The Greek word *diakrisis* (διακρίσις) means discernment or discretion or discrimination. This word appeared very rarely in the NT. Distinctly in the sense of discernment of good or evil comes only once in the Scripture (Heb 5:14). But the “discernment of spirits” (διακρίσεις πνευμάτων), which is very much related to the spiritual discernment in the spiritual direction, is considered as a gift/charism of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 12:10). This gift of God surpasses all other virtues in the field of spiritual direction.

According to an anonymous saying of a desert father “discretion is greater than all the virtues” (Wortly, 2013, p.77). “An elder was asked: “What is the monk’s task?” “Discretion,” he replied” (Wortly, 2013, p.75). If the most important task of a monk is discernment then helping others in discernment is the most important help one can give to the other on the way to perfection. So the most important function of the spiritual father in the spiritual direction is to help his spiritual child in discernment in the spiritual path. Every person has his own limits and potentials. Discerning this and directing that person in the spiritual path is very important. This may be different for person to person. Good for one person is not apt for another person. Here is an example from the desert fathers:

The same abba [Poemen] asked Abba Joseph another question saying, ‘What should I do when the passions attack me? Should I resist them, or let them enter?’ The old man said to him, ‘Let them enter and fight against them.’ So he returned to Scetis where he remained. Now someone from Thebes came to Scetis and said to the brethren, ‘I asked Abba Joseph if I ought to resist the passions when they approach, or let them enter and he replied I ought not to allow them the smallest entry but cut them off immediately’ (Ward, 1975, p.102).

The first person is strong enough to fight the passions so that he may become stronger but the second person will not gain anything from this so he may not allow it to enter into him. Each person is unique and his way to perfection also. Directing a person in the spiritual life with discernment is the most important help the spiritual father can give to his spiritual child.

Then another question related to discernment is whether we shall always go for the advice of the spiritual father? “[O]n the one hand we can ‘easily attain’ discretion, on the other hand, we must always have

recourse to the counsel of the fathers to guide us rather than exercise a grace granted to the individual” (Wortly, 2019, p.74). Yes, guidance of a spiritual father is safer than depending on one’s own wisdom. This is also a mark of humility, to submit to another person and be guided by him, from the part of the spiritual children.

The entire second chapter of Cassian’s *Conferences* is on discernment. For him all other virtues are directed by discernment. Thomas Merton comments on Cassian’s *Conferences* in his *A Course in Desert Spirituality*:

Without discretion their other virtues came to nothing and bore no fruit. Discretion, avoiding contrary extremes, teaches the royal road to God, and this discretion is what the Gospel calls: “the light of the body which is the eye, and if the eye be single the whole body is lightsome” (Mat 6:23). Discretion is neither carried away by enthusiasm, “lifted up” in time of fervour, nor depressed and discouraged in time of trial (Merton, 2019).

It is said about Evagrius that “in the course of fifteen years [in the desert] having purified his mind to the utmost he was counted worthy of the gift of knowledge and wisdom and the discerning of spirits” (Clarke, 1918, p.136).

This discernment is very much related to spirituality and holiness also. One is spiritual and holy through the participation in the Spirit of Holiness, and in the early Church, according to Irenaeus, “the surest sign of spirituality is martyrdom” (*Against Heresies* 5.9.2). As we understand from history the monastic life emerged in the Church as a continuation of martyrdom and even at times called “white martyrdom.” And “this is holiness, and the mark of this spirituality and holiness is *diakrisis*” (Hausherr, 1990). Asceticism is very part of the way of holiness in the monastic tradition. But asceticism without discernment is futile. Antony the Great says: “Some have afflicted their bodies by asceticism, but they lack discernment, and so they are far from God” (Ward, 1975).

### **Other Important Qualities of a Spiritual Father**

What makes a person a spiritual father? Age and grey hair? No. As Cassian says, “the riches of the elders are not to be measured by their grey hairs but by the hard work of their youth and the deserts of their past labours ... Therefore we should not follow in the footprints of all the elders whose heads are covered with grey hair and whose long life

is the only thing that recommends them, nor should we accept their traditions and counsel” (*Conferences* 2.13.1-2). Then what shall be the norm? He continues: “Instead we should follow those who we recognize have shaped their lives in a praiseworthy and upright manner as young men, and who have been instructed not in their own presumptions but in the traditions of their forebears” (*Conferences* 2.13.1-2).

Apart from discernment of spirits what all the qualities needed for a spiritual father? He shall be free of vices that hinder the spiritual life of him and his spiritual children. Evagrius warns of many vices including pride and vain glory in the spiritual masters in doing healing, expel demons and so on (*Praktikos*, 13-14; *Evagrius Ponticus*, 1981, p.19-20) Antony also warns his disciples about this and asks them to live pious life and to pray that “we may receive the gift of discerning spirits” (*Vita Antonii*, no.38). Some important qualities that needed for a spiritual father are discussed below.

**Charity.** An elder took up this ministry because of charity. In dealing with the weakness of the disciples he need extraordinary patience, gentleness, forbearance, delicacy and compassion. “Charity and non-judgment were, without question, the outstanding qualities of the desert fathers/mothers” (Corcoran, 1988, p.447). Compassion for others and understand their plight is the way of charity. Without charity all other virtues, as Paul says, are mere “noisy gong or a clanging cymbal” (1 Cor 13:1). “Holiness consists in being God’s neighbour through charity and all spiritual direction consists in bringing another close to God through charity” (Hausherr, 1990, p.57).

Spiritual fathers are often more strict to their beloved disciples (cf. Heb 12:8). At the same time they are very sensitive to not give more burden (spiritual or physical) than their disciples can carry. He himself carries part of the burden of one’s spiritual child. Constantly praying for the spiritual children is a way of carrying the burden “since of all ascetic works prayer is the one that ultimately demands the greatest effort, and because such prayer for the disciple obtains either relief from pain or greater strength to bear it” (Hausherr, 1990, p.141). Together with prayer listening with kindness and patience, and desiring the good of their children always, as like a natural father, are part of this charity. Slowly a matured and deep Christian friendship arise among them and some modern authors call it as ‘soul friendship.’

**Humility.** Spiritual father who stands at the place of Christ to the disciple shall acquire the mind of Christ who emptied himself and

obeyed his father unto death (Phil 2:5-11). The sense of humility and kenosis in the spiritual father comes from his deep self-awareness and knowledge that he is inadequate to take-up such a ministry, and his participation in the very life of Christ. This surely helped him to see others as they are with a luminous eye. Disclosing of the heart needs humility not only from the part of the directee but also from the director who listen it. Because,

True discretion is not obtained except by true humility. The first proof of this humility will be if not only everything that is to be done but also everything that is thought of is offered to the inspection of the elders, so that, not trusting in one's own judgment, one may submit in every respect to their understanding and may know how to judge what is good and bad according to what they have handed down (Ramsey, 1997).

Spiritual father who asks obedience, which presupposes humility, shall obedient like Christ to his father. Spiritual father who did not undergo spiritual direction in their spiritual life shall not go for directing others.

**Knowledge and Wisdom.** The early monastics and Fathers of the Church consider spiritual direction or guiding the soul as the greatest of all philosophies or knowledge. Those who practice it without enough instruction and knowledge do more harm to the directees than good. (Hausherr, 1990, p.52-54) This is not mere bookish/acquired knowledge but wisdom from the experience in the ways of God working in a person's soul and as the gift of the Holy Spirit. So, "it is necessary that those who are to be promoted to the care of souls have an understanding of things human and divine, and know how to discern the movements of psychic and somatic powers; and they must also possess the other qualities consequent on these" (Hausherr, 1990, p.80). Proper discernment presupposes this knowledge and wisdom. As Abba Poemen says "Vigilance, self-knowledge and discernment; these are the guides of the soul" (Ward, 1975, p.172).

**Leading through Example than Words.** Use less words and lead the spiritual children through example is the quality of a good spiritual father. This presupposes a life of integrity and holiness from the part of a spiritual father. "You cannot cure the souls of others or 'help people' without having changed yourself. You cannot put in order the spiritual economy of others so long as there is chaos in your own soul. You cannot bring peace to others if you do not have it yourself" (Elchaninov, 2001, p.218). As Cassian says "a saintly life is more educative than a

sermon” (Conferences 11.2; Chadwick, 1958). So there are no self-appointed spiritual directors in the East but only reluctant ones though they are ardently seek by many. So “a true spiritual father is the one who proposes a model to his disciple, because what he has to convey is not encoded into a written text, but in his way of being” (Lemeni, 2013, p.75).

Basil in one of his ascetical discourse says about the monastic superior/*hegumen* is also applicable here for spiritual fathers: “[I]t is therefore of the highest importance that the one chosen as guide in this state of life be such that his life may serve as a model of every virtue to those who look to him, and, as the Apostle says, that he be ‘sober, prudent, of good behaviour, a teacher’” (1 Tim 3:2) (Wagner, 1962, p.210-11). So we can say the essential function of any spiritual father is guiding the inner life of the disciple by his own life and example.

**Spiritual Father (*pater pneumatikos*) and Spiritual Master/Guide (*didaskalos*).** Leading through example further differentiate the life and role of a spiritual father and a mere teacher. A spiritual father is not a mere teacher in the modern sense. As Lemeni says “an Abba is never defined as a teacher (*didaskalos*) who teaches in theory a set of knowledge to his disciples” (Lemeni, 2013, p.74). A spiritual father is not teaching a doctrine or science but help the spiritual children to experience the divine life. “The spiritual father being essentially a vehicle of grace, he does not transmit a truth, but rather he embodies it in his own way of life” (Lemeni, 2013, p.76). Hausherr explains that “a person can be a professor, and very good one, but that does not make him a spiritual father; it does not even prove that he can become one, at least in the judgement of the easterners ... The essential, the indispensable condition for becoming someone’s spiritual father is to first be spiritual oneself” (Hausherr, 1990, p.29). So there are so many spiritual masters/teachers but few spiritual fathers.

### **Charismatic and Prophetic Authority of the Spiritual Father**

The authority of the spiritual father is of more prophetic and charismatic than a formal one. Some authors relate the prophetic ministry that arose in the second century to the ministry of spiritual direction and by that relating it to the “prophetic ministry” of Apostle Paul in the early Church, though this practice, as we understood now, emerged in the 4<sup>th</sup> century only (Allen, 1991; Kontzevich, 1989). In the OT prophets are the voice of God to the people. To the spiritual children spiritual

fathers' words become the voice of God. "Abba, one word" is the normal utterance of a disciple to his spiritual father. This we can see in the desert fathers. Yes, the disciple or the spiritual child asking what is the will of God for him. So discerning the will and plan of God for his spiritual child has utmost importance.

As monastic life is not part of Church's hierarchical institution spiritual fathers also not part of that. As Kallistos Ware says "spiritual guides are ordained, not by human hands, but by the hand of God. They are an expression of the Church as "event" or "happening," rather than of the Church as institution" (Ware, 2000, p.129). From the beginning of the monastic life in the Church in the early centuries it is like that. St. Antony of Egypt is considered as a model for this.

Their authenticity comes from this authority. Abandoning oneself into the hands of God in obedience – there blooms this authenticity, for both the spiritual father and to the disciple.

What preserves the authenticity of spiritual direction in the desert is the unrelenting sense of accountability and responsibility. No one set himself or herself up as an authority. Abandonment to another in obedience was the only avenue toward grace; but it was expected of everyone, elders and novices alike! (Chryssavgus, 2003, p. 65).

Otherwise it will lead only to domination. Only by becoming flame they can kindle flame in others. It is said that early spiritual fathers were not men who went after miracles, vision, ecstasies etc. Rather they live very ordinarily, though in dire needs and in the name of God and as a charitable work they did some miracles. "The essential reason for their authority lies in the fact that they treated all things with judgment and discretion of Spirit rather than obstinacy of mind" (Hausherr, 1990, p.40; Ramsey, 1997). This makes them authentic, by that also prophetically authoritative.

## **Conclusion**

Spiritual fatherhood is an essential part of monastic tradition from the beginning of monasticism in the East. All authorities in the Church are from God for the service of his people. While spiritual father represents the charismatic and prophetic authority the bishop represents surely the formal and sacramental authority in the Church. The role of the spiritual father is to help the spiritual children on the way of their spiritual journey. Most importantly he is helping his spiritual children

in discernment (of the spirits) in the way of Christian perfection. At the same time, he is doing this with humility and love with wisdom and knowledge. Most importantly spiritual father's life is the message to the disciple. He is not a mere teacher but represents Christ himself to the spiritual child.

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## ***Patris Corde: An Epitome of Joyful Priesthood***

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### **Abstract**

The revelation of God as Father has a significant impact on theology and the way priests are encouraged to give the experience of God's paternal love and care through their own lives. To participate in the "Divine Fatherhood," a priest needs to broaden the vertical and horizontal horizon necessary to life and a theological confirmation of the priest's indispensable and irreplaceable role as minister of sacraments for the sake of human salvation. The traits of St. Joseph described in the Apostolic Letter of Pope Francis, *Patris Corde*, will help us understand these points to a great extent. This article also suggests some psycho-spiritual supplements to strengthen the priests to participate joyfully in their ongoing formation.

*Keywords:* Divine Fatherhood, Joyful Participation, Ongoing formation

### **Introduction**

Universal Church suitably celebrated St. Joseph's Year with many reflections and action plans. The papal document, *Patris Corde* (With a Father's Heart), published on the 150th Anniversary of the Proclamation of Saint Joseph as the Patron of the Universal Church, itself was enticing and a way pointer to those of different walks of life, especially the priests. Pope Francis has commented that our world today needs fathers in this document. He is not referring to the society alone, but the Church as well; "the Church too needs fathers." Pointing to St. Joseph, Pope says that priests should be like fathers, who are

“the earthly shadow of the Heavenly Father.” Thus, being a priest means being like the Heavenly Father, in which he finds the fulfillment of the joy of Priesthood. One can attain real happiness through the most significant possible assimilation (*homoiosis*) to God, the Father. Participation in the Fatherhood of God is the best possible way for a priest to be joyful. However, today, we see priests and religious are not happy and running away from the realities of the world they live in and are hesitant to face it. Bishop Robert Barron said recently:

If we define our values, truth, and purpose, we effectively lock ourselves into the tiny space of what we can imagine or control. When we follow these prompts of our culture today, we become cramped souls... The entire point of a Catholic intellectual formation is to produce *magnae animae* - great souls.

Today we need the priests who seek the will of God to be open to the realities and to be great souls rather than confining themselves and being satisfied within the tiny space that they can control.

### **Priesthood – Participation in the Divine Fatherhood**

God, who is love in Himself, calls every human being to participate in His Fatherhood. In His image and likeness, He created every human being in this world. Both the creation accounts in Genesis make it clear that, unlike other creatures, God took special care in the making of humans. He created them with a personal touch (See Gen 1:26-27; 2:7, 22). God has formed human beings in his image and likeness, making human beings unique or different from others. Thus, we all are called to be like God and participate in his divine Fatherhood by very nature. And it is the call for every human being, incredibly the Christian faithful, to grow to the likeness of God, the Father. Thus, a priest is chosen from the Christian faith is specially called to participate in the divine Fatherhood of God.

**The Meaning of Participation – Divinization of Human Beings.** The term “participation” comes from the Latin verb *participare*, meaning ‘to take part,’ or ‘to share.’ Hence, participation in the divine nature does not remain conceptual, but as Christians, “it is a reality that determines human beings’ sense of life in the present.” Even though, as Christians, we live our lives oriented towards an eschatological life, by way of participation, we share in the divinity of God in our life here itself. Thus, we become a new being, “transformed into the spiritual

existence of God,” which is the ultimate goal of every Christian faithful. This would be and must be revealed in our day-to-day life situations.

St. Peter, in his Epistle, says that all those who believe in Christ are “participants of the divine nature” (2 Pet 1:4). Participation is not a philosophical formulation, but it pertains to reality. By way of participation, we all attain an intimate connection with God. God, in His love, gives human beings a share in his own life and human beings partake in it. *Lumen Gentium* clearly states: “The eternal Father created the whole world by a free and hidden plan of His wisdom and goodness. He planned to raise men to a participation of the divine life.” This reveals the plan of God that has been revealed through us in the whole history of salvation.

Hence, human participation in God means both the “humanization” of God and the “divinization” of man. Participation, therefore, would imply “deifying transformation of man.” In the case of a priest, since he continues the mediator service of Christ, participation would demand a complete transformation of oneself to share with the divine nature and its qualities. It is a two-fold process of self-emptying and fashioning oneself according to divine nature.

**Fatherhood – The Divine Nature of God.** God is often portrayed as furious, arrogant, punishing, accusing, and cruel. But at the same time, God is often described as a compassionate, merciful, saving, liberating, and consoling being. For instance, in the book of Jonah, we hear Jonah saying, “for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing” (Jon 4:2), which speaks of the fundamental nature of God. We find many such instances (Ex 34:6-7; Num 14:18; Neh 9:31; Joel 2:13; Hos 11:8-9) in the Old Testament that reveal the fundamental nature of God.

In the same way, we find a God who moves along with human beings. In the book of Exodus, we find God traveling along with the people of Israel, all through their journey, “in a pillar of cloud by day, to lead them along the way, and in a pillar of fire by night, to give them light...” (Ex 13:21). We find God as One who fights for them, providing food and water for them, protecting them from all dangers, and a God who accompanies them always. A close analysis of all these traits reveals that they resemble the qualities of a father.

Our fathers manifest many of these traits, which may differ according to the situation. At times, he may behave like a friend, loving, protecting, criticizing, accusing us as situations demand, and at other times he may punish us and be arrogant towards us when we go wrong. Being a father, all these qualities are necessary depending on each circumstance. A good and responsible father should play all these roles whenever necessary, which would benefit the children and not to harm them. All these traits add to God's divine nature, which is love itself. In the Scriptures, God's love is chiefly presented as a parent's love for their children (See Mt 23:37; Lk 13:34).

The Fatherhood of God is not a human projection onto God but the Father's ontological relational mode of existence with the Son. The revelation of God as Father, the loving Father of the Son and his human creation, has had a significant impact on theology and the way priests are encouraged to give the experience of God's 'parental' love and care through their own lives. The Son has put across this message of the loving Father throughout his earthly life and supremely in his sacrifice for the world's sins. This is what is expressed in the prayer of the Syro-Malabar liturgy: "You are holy. You alone are the true Father! All Fatherhood in heaven and on earth comes from You."

**Participation in Christ, the Icon of the Father.** Human beings' participation in God is closely connected with the person of Jesus Christ. "He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation" (Col 1:15). Through him, by his taking part in our humanity, we were made eligible to participate in the divinity of God (Col 1:22). Through his incarnation, Christ Jesus has made it possible for us human beings the participation in the divine life of God, as St. Athanasius, the Church Father, says, "God became man so that that man might become God" (On the Incarnation 54:3). It is an initiative from God, and it is given freely to all of us. We thus participate in this by accepting this invitation of God in our faith in Jesus Christ (Jn 3:16-17; Gal 2:16, 20).

John portrays Jesus as the 'way' to the Father (Jn 14:6). It is further explained after the request of Philip to "show the Father" (Jn 14:8). Then, Jesus reveals the relationship between the Father and the Son (Jn 14:9-14). The extended explanations given by Jesus can be summed up within a single question: 'Why don't you recognize the Father dwells in me?' As the Gospel presents it, the 'type' of Fatherhood is exemplified by Christ himself in his earthly life. All those who follow him are invited to bear the image of the Father with them (Mt. 23:9).

Moreover, a priest who follows Christ radically needs to reflect God, the Father, through his words and deeds. The imagery employed by Saint Paul to convey the love of God into the reality of daily life is one of the most eloquent examples of spiritual Fatherhood the Church ever had. Saint Paul places spiritual Fatherhood above any other point in the Church: “For though you might have ten thousand guardians in Christ, you do not have many fathers” (1 Cor. 4:15a).

St. Ignatius of Antioch is among the first to develop the iconic imagery connecting the bishop’s ministry to divine Fatherhood. On his way to martyrdom in Rome, St Ignatius advises St. Polycarp, the then Bishop of Smyrna, whom he called “as one who possesses the mind of God,” to unite, love, pray, help, heal the wounds, exhort all people to gain salvation, to pray unceasingly for all, to protect the widows and to treat the slaves with humility. The bishop should address the faithful personally, “as is the way of God Himself,” carry their infirmities on his shoulders “as a good champion of Christ ought to do.” This all-embracing love of the bishop directly references God’s unconditional love for all people.

In the celebration of the liturgy, the bishop/priest is an icon of God the Father and Christ, who is the image or the icon of the invisible God and the high-priest. The bishop/priest is the one who feeds the community with the mysteries, the body, and blood of Christ. Likewise, a pastor leads his community into the mystical life of the Church and feeds them with the sacraments and the word of God.

God invites all human beings to partake in His divinity, and He bestows the divine life freely for us. God allows us to share in His divinity; however, because of human freedom, we can determine the degree to which we could participate in it. Participation, which is not static but dynamic, always insists on being lived. Only when we live out this participatory life in the divine could we find the real or ultimate goal of this participation, perfect happiness, bliss, and joy. So, the ultimate goal of this participation in the divine nature is attaining satisfaction. Priest, being the participant of the divine nature of God, that is, the Fatherhood of God, finds this fulfillment or the ultimate goal, the joy, only when he lives out this Fatherhood in his day-to-day life, in his priestly ministry. This Fatherhood should be expressed in the vertical and horizontal dimensions of participation. Only then does he attain the joy of his life as a priest.

## **Revealing the Father’s Heart: The Vertical and Horizontal Dimensions of Participation**

The vertical dimension of participation for a priest would mean his relationship with God, the Father, that is, accepting God, the Father, like his Father. Being a priest, he must be closely related to God, the Father, at every moment of his life. The horizontal dimension of participation means, for a priest, to reveal the Fatherhood of God to fellow human beings; it is his relationship with the faithful or the fellow human beings. Pope Francis, in his apostolic letter *Patris Corde* says, “Fathers are not born, but made. A man does not become a father simply by bringing a child into the world but by taking up the responsibility to care for that child. Whenever a man accepts responsibility for the life of another, in some way, he becomes a father to that person.” A priest’s responsibility under his Ordination is first and foremost administering the sacraments, both vertical and horizontal. I would like to explicate it with the characteristic traits of St Joseph, which is mentioned in the papal document, *Patris Corde*.

**A Beloved Father at the Baptistry.** All the Christian faith venerates St Joseph as a father, a loving father. He committed himself to be the spouse of Mother Mary and the Father of Jesus. “By making his life a sacrificial service... he devoted completely to them in his life and work... his heart and all his abilities.” A priest should be a beloved one, devoting oneself to the service of others with his heart. Whatever benefits a priest may render should be out of his heart, should be filled with his love; his services should be out of his love and not by force, and just to fulfill his duty or responsibility. Services rendered out of love surely make a difference in the minds of the people served. Priests are also called to exercise motherly care over the faithful.

St. Paul makes that claim, especially for those engaged in apostolic work. He writes to the Galatians: “My little children, for whom I am again in the pain of childbirth until Christ is formed in you” (Gal 4:19). Like St. Paul, a priest must present himself as a mother by working and praying for the perfection of the people entrusted to him thus, and he can undergo the pangs of motherhood afresh; he cannot be satisfied until Christ is fully formed in them. Priests are authorized under their Ordination to give birth to the children for the Church through the administration of Holy Baptism. From the baptismal font onwards, as *Presbyterorum Ordinis* declares, “priests exercise the office of Father and teacher among and for the People of God... Priests must sincerely



acknowledge and promote the dignity of the laity, willingly listening to them... Christian faithful should follow their pastors as fathers with filial love.”

**A Merciful Father at the Confessional.** Jesus saw the tender love of a Father in Joseph in whom the compassionate and merciful, steadfastly loving nature of God is reflected. Tenderness would mean showing mercy or being human. Tenderness would help oneself and others to heal the frailties in our life. A priest should be a father with this tender love, full of mercy and compassion. He can be a tender and loving father when he is in the confessional. A priest must form in the faithful a Christian conscience, pardon and peace. He must reach out like the Good Samaritan to wounded humanity with the healing balm of the sacrament. Pope Francis often repeats that we all are sinners, and the priests should be aware of the amount of mercy that they have received personally from God. “The man who comes to confess his sins is the same who will listen to the heart of other penitents who come to confess their sins.” So, we should also be showing mercy to others. Every priest should be the sign and instrument of the forgiveness of God, helping people to embrace and experience the love and compassion of God. In the efforts to restore the pastoral value of this sacrament, nothing is better than the priest himself making his confession.

In his advice to priests and other shepherds, Pope Francis beautifully describes the need to broaden the merciful heart for others. Priests are witnesses and ministers of the ever-increasing abundance of the Father’s mercy. As Jesus did, a priest is supposed to incarnate compassion by “doing good and healing” (Acts 10:38) in a thousand ways so that he could touch everyone. A priest can help to accustom mercy so that each person can embrace it and experience it personally. This will enable people to understand and practice mercy with creativity in ways that respect their local cultures and families. There is no joy for priests other than sharing the tender and loving God with others.

**An Ordained and Obedient Father.** Holy Orders make the priest the Lord’s emissary and the custodian of his mysteries. St. Joseph was ordained to take care of Mary and Jesus, the sacred treasures entrusted by God, the Father. He obeyed the will of God with utmost faithfulness. Unlike Mother Mary, the will of God was revealed to St. Joseph in his dreams, precisely four dreams. These four dreams would shed light on the four qualities of the obedience of St. Joseph. Firstly, Joseph always made an immediate response to the will of God (See

Mt 1:24). Secondly, Joseph never hesitated to obey, regardless of the hardships involved (See Mt 2:13). Thirdly, Joseph promptly obeyed the plan revealed to him (See Mt 2:21). And finally, Joseph was always ready to change even if he was prepared otherwise (See Mt. 2:22-23).

The obedience of St. Joseph should be the model of obedience for every priest. But when priests find it difficult to be obedient to their Superiors or the Bishop, it creates some undesired situations in the Church. In the liturgy of Priestly Ordination, he pledges himself to direct the local Church as a “worthy co-worker” with the bishop under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. This pastoral leadership means caring for people’s souls as they move through life so that they can find their way to God, maintaining the unity of the faithful among themselves as well as with the local diocese and the universal Church.

The priests should be willing to obey the decisions of their Superiors or the Bishop as the plan of God. The Second Vatican Council Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests, *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, put obedience as a unique spiritual requirement in the life of a priest. Priests should “dedicate their own will by obedience to the service of God and their fellow men... and strive to satisfy the needs of their flocks.” At the same time, “Bishops should regard priests as their brothers and friends.” Obedience is not merely following the commands of others, but it is for a purpose – for the kingdom of God. As the sacrament of Holy Orders makes the ordained priest a sharer in the Priesthood of Christ, they should follow Christ in their obedience too. Obedience is a call through which God invites the priests to find joy in obeying Apostles’ successors. By obeying, a priest participates in Christ’s obedience who perfectly obeyed God, the Father on the cross.

**An Accepting and Healing Father.** Joseph healed the possible-wounded situations in the life of Mary and protected her good name, her dignity, and even her life. Accepting unconditionally would mean setting aside one’s ideas or plans and getting God’s plan in their life; moreover, taking responsibility for whatever things happen in carrying out this plan of God. Every priest should be an accepting father, respectful, and sensitive to the needs of others. Following the attitude of St Joseph, every priest should be courageous enough to welcome others, without exception, the weak, the poor, the marginalized, the needy, the discriminated, and especially those on their deathbed and provide them appropriately and sufficiently. They should be instruments to instill hope and joy in others irrespective of the difficulties involved

in this task. This should be the hallmark of every priest. Priests should help everyone to be joyful and hopeful in their life.

According to Catholic tradition, having died in the arms of Jesus and Mary, St. Joseph is also known as the Patron of a happy death. One of the important duties of a priest is comforting those who are ailing and on deathbed by the sacrament of the anointing of the Sick. This is a sacrament which by the work of the Holy Spirit and by the prayer of a priest confers upon dangerously-ill Christian health of the soul and also of the body when this is conducive to the soul's welfare. Just as St. James writes: "Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the Church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them, and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven" (Jas 5:14-15). A priest is anointed to accompany joyfully the people of God entrusted to his pastoral care from their birth to death.

**A Courageous and Anointing Father.** Sacrament of Confirmation is one of the initial sacraments in the Catholic Church. The newly baptized are anointed or "strengthened" in their supernatural life by this sacrament. A priest is supposed to prepare the faithful entrusted to his pastoral care to defend the faith in threatening situations, in other words, playing an apologist's role. Joseph was a man who creatively and courageously responded to the plans of God. He was prompted to carry out diverse and contrary actions in his dreams. But he was ever ready to change his plans and actions accordingly. He did not wait for God to act, but he found ways and solutions fittingly for himself. A priest should be a man like St Joseph, who was creatively courageous. At times, we wait for God to act, to find our solutions to our difficulties. We put the burden upon God, hesitant to own the responsibility of our decisions. The courage of St Joseph teaches us to be creative and find solutions by ourselves, trusting in the providence of God. It may at times result in turning a problem into a possibility. A priest should be courageous enough to take decisions about the faithful entrusted to his care, relying upon the providence of God that it would result for their welfare and not for harm. We may find it challenging to understand the plans of God, but it is good that we remember that God is a God of surprises and his ways are mysterious.

The walk to Christian holiness is a process of growth to maturity towards a perfect human. As a Christian grows in this maturity with the

help of the Spirit, they will manifest the various fruits of the Spirit (see Gal 5:22). The priests must be able to taste the joy of the resurrection of Christ and bear witness to the world that Jesus is the Lord.

**A Sacrificing Father at the Altar.** Eucharist is a sacrament of Christ's sacrifice on the cross. It is not merely a ritual celebration alone but demands a life appropriate to the Crucified One. It is not enough for a priest to celebrate the Eucharistic sacrifice. He must live it. As a hardworking person, St. Joseph cooperated with God. As the breadwinner of the Holy Family, Joseph abandoned his pleasures and participated in the divine plan. Thus, he became broken bread that symbolizes the Body of Christ sacrificed for us on the cross. For a Priest, sacrifice means to be committed in his priestly ministry. Through his sacramental sacrifice of salvation to the Father, the priest lends his intelligence, will, voice, and hands to Christ. He must lay down his entire life as a sacrifice on the Altar. So, for no reason, the priest should look to himself and strive for the well-being of the people trusting God and loving them. The priest should be rooted firmly in the Lord, open and available at all times to others, brothers and sisters. The life and ministry of a priest are bound with the "pastoral charity," in other words, the shepherd's love for his flock. "This pastoral charity flows out extraordinarily from the Eucharistic sacrifice. This stands as the root and center of the whole life of a priest.

The joy priest finds in his sacrificial life is participating at God's table as his children. Thus a priest enjoys the enduring, blessing-rich, healing presence of God among his people. The sacrificial character of the Eucharist challenges a priest's life and leads to a Eucharistic spirituality of self-surrender. This spirituality can give the strength to love daily life with Jesus Christ for the glory of God. In the Syro-Malabar liturgy, there is a Syriac expression, *Galiyūs appē*, which means 'cheerful face' which is recited by the celebrant before second Lord's Prayer: "Enable us to stand in your presence with a cheerful face (*Galiyūs appē*) and pure hearts." This was already known to biblical wisdom: "The sign of a happy heart is a cheerful face" (Sir 13:26). The priest experiences Christian joy in the celebration of the Altar.

**A Father for Family Ties.** The Christian marriage has supernatural elements attached to it. The baptized man and woman who contract matrimony beget children for the Kingdom of God. They train them in natural learning and goodness and supernatural faith and wisdom. They develop their personalities naturally and supernaturally since the

graces of the sacrament help them attain the beatific vision. Joseph acted as a father to Jesus, a foster father, for his whole life. He took the responsibility to protect Mary and Jesus, nurture him, and provide everything for his maturity. It has been beautifully explained in the Gospel: “The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him” (Lk 2:40). A priest should also, following the example of St Joseph, be foster fathers to the many orphans in our society and those children who lack fatherly care and protection.

Pope Francis says, “Joseph was the earthly shadow of the Heavenly Father.” He further explains that “Being a father entails introducing children to life and reality, not being over-protective or possessive, but rather making them capable of deciding for themselves, enjoying the freedom and exploring new possibilities.” After the example of St Joseph, every priest should have non-possessive love for his place and people. This attitude grants them greater freedom and total availability in their ministerial commitments. Priests have a special obligation to pay attention to youth, married people, and parents. A pastor’s care must be towards forming a genuine Christian community.

In a nutshell, by following these characteristic traits of St Joseph, a priest can be a sacrament, a living sign, and an instrument of the Fatherhood of God. And it is by fulfilling all these nuances a priest accomplishes the vertical and horizontal dimension of his participation in the Divine nature of God.

### **Psycho-Spiritual Supplements for a Joyful Participation**

Participation in the divine Fatherhood and St. Joseph’s horizontal and vertical involvement in the Fatherhood gives us the right insights for a joyful priesthood. However, the life of a priest is beyond all its theoretical explanations. The struggles and challenges through which he is undergone are immense. In the Letter of St. Paul to Romans, “I do not understand my actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate” (Rom 7:15). The impeccability of a priest is an exaggeration today. The priest is not immune to psychological problems and is impervious to mundane human struggles. So the question is: How should they be supported psycho-spiritually in their ongoing formation to make their life more joyful? The following practical ways may shed light to keep the priest joyful throughout his ongoing formation.

**A Unique Relationship with God.** Priests are suffering from a significant identity crisis: “Priests are no different from anyone else.”

This kind of undifferentiated identity comes out of their lack of self-confidence. First of all, priests need awareness that they are Christ's choice, though there are flaws in them. Jesus offered to them (Apostles) a kind of intimate friendship that he did not offer to others. The priest is supposed to be a part of an "inner circle," or a kind of "friend of God." So, he has unique access to God for his people, and as such, he becomes the official representative of God. Self-surrender is the price of friendship with God.

Rossetti (2009), an American Catholic priest and psychologist, surveyed the happiness level of priests and confirmed that priests' relationship to God helps them above all have their sense of mental health and well-being. This survey result shows that a priest's relationship to God strengthens him from the disorders of somatization, depression, and anxiety. Thus his mental health, in general, tends to be better. He is less likely to be burned out due to his more significant sense of personal accomplishment, lower level of emotional exhaustion, and depersonalization. This is, of course, a happy finding that 'priests are happy.' The factors contributing to this happiness are close friendship with God, Marian's devotion, spiritual reading, daily Eucharistic celebration, the sacrament of Reconciliation, canonical and private prayers, etc. Priests are the persons finding the buried treasure. The scriptures note that he did so with "joy" (Mt 13:44). This "joy" helps a priest go beyond his pains and sufferings. The priest must be reminded of, as we read in the book of Nehemiah, "the joy of the Lord is your strength" (Neh. 8:10). It is adequate for priests to focus on God instead of their fears and anxieties, and they can help others learn about the joy they have.

**Ongoing Spiritual Direction.** "Ongoing formation" reminds us that the experience of discipleship is not ceasing to exist with the seminary life of a priest. It continues under the action of the Holy Spirit, within a process of gradual and continuous configuration to Jesus Christ, in his being and his acting. In this process, ongoing spiritual direction is a great help to those in religious life, ministry, and other professions where one has to make decisions affecting many lives regularly. Even ordinary confession should involve some spiritual direction. Unfortunately, many busy priests have come to forget or neglect this obligation. Priests have to undergo the roles of both a spiritual director and directee. The spiritual director in primitive times was much more than the present name implies. He was a spiritual father who 'begot'

the perfect life in his disciple's soul by his instructions, by his prayer, his sanctity, and his example.

Happiness in the priestly/religious life depends on wise direction, especially during formation. The ideal would be for everyone to have a father to whom they could go for regular direction. Thomas Merton, a famous Benedictine Monk of the twentieth century, highlights three basic attitudes a directee should have. The first is gratitude that the one can receive this ministry. Gratitude keeps one attentive to the graces and blessings God provides through the process. The directee needs to be thankful for even a simple, insightful thought. Another attitude is realism. It requires him to avoid unrealistic expectations that a director can perform a wonder in his life. A directee must be realistic enough to know that there is no perfect spiritual director and that formation is gradual. The third attitude Merton highlights are humility. He notes that some directees are looking for flattery and approval. Only those with the virtue of humility can genuinely participate in the process of spiritual direction.

Louf, a Benedictine Monk and the abbot of Mont-des-Cats in France, connects the insights from the human sciences like psychology for the benefits of the spiritual direction. In his famous work, *Grace Can Do More*, he admits that no one today can do spiritual path ignorant of psychology. He has used contemporary depth psychology in his spiritual direction methods. Like Merton, he also admits that humility is required most from the directee. Directees bravely and humbly make themselves more transparent by manifesting their thoughts, desires, and actions, some of which may be taboo. Directors are to listen in love without judging, in such a way that directees feel true acceptance and safety. Such acceptance breeds trust, which allows directees to deepen their self-revelation and widen their self-concept as they discover they no longer need to hide parts of themselves. This transparency fosters the birth and flourishing of the true self. In his autobiography, *Mystical Journey*, William Johnston SJ, a significant writer of contemporary spirituality, says that his vocation was rooted in his true self, and he considered that it is relevant to "search for the true self rather than on obedience to the rules." He further says:

People could be encouraged to find their true self by emptiness or detachment or prayer by letting go of clinging to created things. This is the way of Meister Eckhart and the mystics. It is the nada (nothing) of St. John of the Cross. It is the way of Zen. It is the way of the Gospel.

Would not this be more human than obliging people to use the words of the catechism and excommunicate them if they fail to do so?

Louf says that we need a shift from living out of the superficial self to living out of the deep self. A priest/religious should overcome self-will through obedience. Overcoming self-will means not denying the self but letting go of sin and superficiality, which keep us residing on the surface. The birth of the true self is birth into love and freedom. A priest who regularly undergoes spiritual direction could find his true self and live out the deep self, and he will be the most joyful man in his life and ministry.

**Intimate Communion of Relationships.** Relationships are the most significant source of joy. Priests are often seen as the ones caught up in the joys of fellowship within a community of faith. Friendly interactions occur in the community, workplace, and every aspect of life. These interactions nurture a need ranging from simple recognition to intimacy. “The intimate encounter can occur across gender, generation, status, class and education, and among persons of great diversity and experience. It is a spiritual encounter transcending all barriers, but inherently founded on trust.” Mostly a priest comes across a trio of relationships connected with his ministry, namely, bishop, presbyters, and the people of God entrusted in his pastoral care. If he could have a harmonious relationship with these three groups, it would be a horizontal supplement for his joyful priestly life.

The relationship between priests and their bishop is an important one. A bishop must be a father and brother to his priests. Both roles together make the relationship effective and friendly. In this fraternal setting, the virtue of obedience to one’s bishop is more inviting. Priests have to consider this obedience to their authorities as a promise or vow an important value because it is strongly connected with their happiness. Priesthood is a life of humble service. If he focuses more on himself, a kind of clerical narcissism will creep into his life, and he could not give himself entirely to the Church and the people.

Under the Holy Orders, a priest is brought into the *ordo presbyterorum*, which comprises a unity and can be understood as a genuine family. The fraternity among priests is a privileged space where the priest can find help in overcoming human limitations and weaknesses. The recent document published by the Congregation for the Clergy on the “Priesthood” calls this fraternity the sacramental fraternity. It further says,



Priestly perfection... cannot be achieved in isolation since priests form one presbyterate whose unity is made up of special bonds of apostolic charity, ministry, and brotherhood. Thus, the intimate sacramental fraternity of priests is the first manifestation of charity and the first place in which it can grow. All this can be achieved by the help of the Holy Spirit, and not without a personal spiritual struggle, to purify oneself of all forms of individualism.

As Pope John Paul II says, “the grace of Holy Orders... takes up and elevates the human and psychological bonds of affection and friendship, as well as the spiritual bonds which exist between priests.” Priests have to see in others their brothers rather than rivals. Jealousy among priests will be an anti-witnessing. It would be better to highlight the good and beautiful things their brothers do and learn to take joy in them. Priests who have good friends are much more likely to be happier priests.

A priest’s friendship need not be restricted among fellow priests; moreover, they can have a good rapport with the people of God who are entrusted with his pastoral care. “He may not remain emotionally and spiritually isolated from them.” The separation from the people of God will weaken their ministry and their own psychological and spiritual health. Priests have to live out their vocation by being among the people. Priests are God’s unique “letters of recommendation” to humanity (2 Cor. 3:1-3). People could read these letters of God written in the hearts of priests evidently through their life of sanctity. It is not the praise of others that motivates the priests to live a spiritual life, but a desire to honor their Lord through the life they live so that they may become a sweet aroma to those saved by grace through faith in faith Christ.

### **Conclusion**

God calls every Christian to participate in His divine life unconditionally. But it is left for every one of us, to what extent we partake in it. A priest has a special call, a call to be a father. His participation in the Divine life is to disclose the Fatherhood of God not only to the faithful alone but also to all human beings indiscriminately. The ultimate goal of this participation is eternal joy, which is fulfilled only through accomplishing the vertical and horizontal dimensions of his involvement in the divine nature. We need priests today with Father’s Heart, both in the Church and society. “Ite ad Joseph!” is another expression showing a father’s generous heart, traditionally attributed to St. Joseph. “Go to Joseph!”

were the words of Pharaoh to the people of Egypt during the years of famine (Gen. 41:55). During the Covid-19 pandemic, Church implores the help of St Joseph to find ways to overcome all the hurdles and hardships of life. If a priest could inculcate the characteristic traits of St Joseph, then he finds the fulfillment of the divine participation, the eternal bliss or joy. A Priest with a father's heart finds his Priesthood joyful.

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# Saint Joseph and the Role of Fatherhood in Religious Formation

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## Abstract

Joseph becomes a model for the present formators for the following reasons: 1) Though he was not the physical father of Jesus, he was the legal father of Jesus. 2) Joseph fulfills all the duties; a father was supposed to do for the growth of child Jesus. In the same way, formators are not physical fathers of the formees. However, they must be sufficiently equipped to be genuine fathers to the candidates undergoing formation. The article reflects Saint Joseph, an ideal father, a Formator and one who was filled with God's righteousness. The article identifies that Joseph accepted his fatherhood as a plan of God, he was righteous in relationship with God and others, and his selfless nature towards Jesus and Mary. As the character of the mission of both Joseph and the formator is the same, the formator should also possess such virtues to live his fatherhood effectively.

*Keywords:* Discernment, Fatherhood, Righteousness, Religious Formation, Formator

## Introduction

Blankenhorn (1995) wrote a book on the dangers of fatherlessness in America. He states:

In short, the key for men is to be fathers. The key for children is to have fathers. The key for society is to create fathers. For society, the primary results of fatherhood are right-doing males and better outcomes for children. Conversely, the primary

consequences of fatherlessness are rising male violence and declining child well-being. In the United States at the close of the twentieth century, paternal disinvestment has become the major cause of declining child well-being and the underlying source of our most critical social problems, especially those rooted in violence (Blankenhorn, 1995).

The author is speaking about the necessity of having physical fathers for the growth and development of children. In the same way, father figures are a must in the life of those undergoing formation for becoming religious or priests.

One of the persisting complaints by the candidates undergoing religious and priestly training is that their formation program has restrictions and control. The general tendency is that when controlled in one area, they look for other means to attain the desired entertainment. Such violation of rules is the human tendency to rebel when their freedom is curtailed. The reason for the first parents' sin in the biblical narratives is the same (Gen 3:1-8). They were rejecting the fatherhood of God by going against His will. The central thrust of the salvation history is to re-establish this fatherhood of God. God tried to re-establish His fatherhood through different mediums like the prophets and other messengers. The culmination of God's attempt to re-establish His fatherhood is seen in the incarnation of the word of God, His son Jesus Christ. God, the creator, knows that human beings require the presence of a father to actualize their potentialities and for being successful in their life. When he sent His only son Jesus Christ into this world, He was particular about having an earthly father for him in the figure of Saint Joseph. In the Apostolic letter *Redemptoris Custos*, Pope John Paul (1989) says: "It was to assure fatherly protection for Jesus that God chose Joseph to be Mary's spouse" (Paul II, 1989, §7). The purpose of this article is to make a humble attempt to present Saint Joseph as an ideal father and thus to establish the role of fatherhood in religious formation.

### **Saint Joseph an Ideal Father**

There are indications in the infancy narrative that Joseph is the legal father of Jesus. A son's circumcision was the first religious obligation of a father, and with this ceremony (Lk 2:21), Joseph exercised his right and duty concerning Jesus (Paul II, 1989, §11). In circumcision, Joseph names the child "Jesus." In conferring the name, Joseph declares his legal fatherhood over Jesus, and in speaking the name he proclaims the

child's mission as Saviour (Paul II, 1989, §12). In the presentation of Jesus in the temple, they offered two young pigeons as a ransom. The ransoming of the firstborn is another obligation of the father, and it is fulfilled by Joseph (Paul II, 1989, §13). The Church clarifies that Joseph was not the physical father of Jesus, but becomes the father of Jesus by having the values a father needs to have in his relationship with his child. Pope Francis says: "Fathers are not born, but made. A man does not become a father simply by bringing a child into the world, but by taking up the responsibility to care for that child. Whenever a man accepts responsibility for the life of another, in some way he becomes a father to that person" (Francis, 2020, §7).

There are traces of the fatherhood of Joseph in the gospels. Amaladoss writes (April, 2021, 288):

Through Joseph, Jesus becomes a descendant of King David. Both Mathew and Luke offer genealogies to show that Joseph is a descendant of David. Mathew goes back to Abraham and Luke to Adam (Mt 1-17: Lk 3:23-38). So it is through Joseph that Jesus is legally linked to the history of salvation through God's chosen people. So, Joseph is not simply a foster father, as we may be tempted to think, but the legal father of Jesus.

Commenting on Fatherhood, Choondal (February 13, 2021) says: "Joseph had the qualities of ideal fatherhood because authentic fatherhood is not merely biological or possession but enhanced by creative courage, gentleness, responsibility, and faithfulness".

**Fatherhood of Joseph and the Plan of God.** A person becomes a natural father when he begets a child and lives for that child, which is the law of nature. In the case of Saint Joseph, he became a father to Jesus Christ, according to the plan of God (Amaladoss, April 2021, 288). It is made clear in the action of Joseph: "When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him and took Mary as his wife" (Mat 1:24). Joseph was ready to accept the message he received from God through the angel. Fernades (March 2021) observes that "since it was God's plan and God's hand is at work, Joseph acts in obedience." Because of this quality, Joseph is designated as an accepting father by Pope Francis (Francis, 2020, §4). He writes: "Joseph set aside his ideas in order to accept the course of events and mysterious as they seemed, to embrace them, take responsibility for them and make them part of his history" (Francis, 2020, §4). When a person can accept his fatherhood, as a plan of God, he will be able to

take up that responsibility with a sense of sacrifice and forgo selfish attachments. Saint Paul VI writes:

Joseph made his life a sacrificial service to the mystery of the incarnation and its redemptive purpose. He employed his legal authority over the Holy Family to devote himself entirely to them in his life and work. He turned his human vocation to domestic love into a superhuman oblation of himself, his heart and all his abilities, a love placed at the service of the Messiah who was growing to maturity in his home (Paul VI, March 27, 1966).

Physical fatherhood is not just enough for being a genuine father. Still, he needs to possess certain basic qualities like sparing his time for taking care of the children, hardworking to earn a living, quality of imparting a sense of security in his presence etc.

***Fatherhood a Biblical Perspective.*** The promises given to Abraham are Blessings, Offspring and Land (Gen 12:1-9). In the Pentateuchal narrative, especially in Genesis, the very frequent genealogical formulas show the unbroken line of descendants. From the narrative, it is evident that God decides the offspring and thus, decides the fatherhood of a person. As fatherhood is a gift from God it is to be accepted as a sacred duty. Joseph had other plans for his life but God decided otherwise and he accepted it. When a person is disposed to accept the role of God in deciding fatherhood, the sacredness of the family relationship can be preserved.

As God decides the physical fatherhood, the spiritual fatherhood a person takes up also is to be accepted as a plan of God. Hann (2014) says:

Joseph's vocation is to be an earthly image of Jesus' heavenly father. God is more a Father than any man on earth, though he fathers without gender, without body, without sexual organs or a sexual act, and without a spouse. God's fatherhood is perfect and so we know that fatherhood is not primarily physical, but spiritual. The fatherhood of Joseph is spiritual and real, though virginal, just as the fatherhood of God is spiritual and nonphysical.

The role of formators is almost like the role of Joseph, that their fatherhood is not physical but spiritual. However, the formators need to realize that they take up the responsibility of exercising their fatherhood as the plan of God.

***Fatherhood of Formator as Plan of God.*** Many religious congregations are having difficulty finding the right formators for training their youngsters. It is considered a very demanding responsibility to be a model to the candidates. Some others don't have the confidence and patience to deal with the formees who are very young. This may be due to a lack of understanding of the sacredness of the ministry of being a formator. First of all, accept it as God's plan or as God's special choice. It is a choice after the model of Joseph, who was privileged to be the father of Jesus Christ. In the same way, those who are involved in the formation are privileged to take care of the representatives of Christ. From a secular perspective, many might have considered the role of Joseph as something which was not so colorful. However, he did it graciously that he is venerated and held as a powerful intercessor in the Church, especially in times of struggle and confusion. Though strenuous, the formator needs to be genuine and transparent, and help build up trust between the formator and formee. Joseph, a transparent person, was designated as a 'just man' in the Bible.

### **Fatherhood and Righteousness**

**The etymology of righteousness.** The Greek word for righteous is δίκαιος, which means "a person who upholds the customs and norms of behaviour, including especially public service, that make for the well-ordered, civilized society" (Bauer, Danker, Arndt, & Gingrich, 2000). The Hebrew word for righteous is צַדִּיק which means; "the one conforming to the laws of God and people" (Bauer, Danker, Arndt, & Gingrich, 2000). The text further clarifies the significance of the word righteous in NT: "In keeping with OT tradition, NT writers emphasize a connection between upright conduct and sense of responsibility to God" (Bauer, Danker, Arndt, & Gingrich, 2000). The lexicon gives a very respectful tribute to Joseph by saying: "Joseph who is interested in doing the right thing honorable, just, good with the connotation of a person with a merciful heart" (Bauer, Danker, Arndt, & Gingrich, 2000).

**Righteousness in the Gospel of Mathew.** Mathew presents Joseph as a 'righteous man' (Mat 1:19). "The Gospels do not record any word ever spoken by Joseph along the way. But the silence of Joseph has its special eloquence, for thanks to that silence we can understand the truth of the Gospel's judgment that he was a just man" (Paul II, 1989). In the narrative program of Mathew, the significance of this righteousness is explained in the Sermon on the Mount. It explains



that the right relationship with God, human beings, and the world comes with accepting Him as the father, and it is being manifested in the prayer that Jesus teaches his disciples (Mat 6:9-15). The right relationship with others is to accept all of them as the children of God (Mat 7:12). The relationship with the world must be a balanced one, one should not be unnecessarily worried about the concerns of this world (Mat 6:25-34).

The righteousness of Joseph was manifested in his relationship with God, which is why he could accept what was asked by God. According to Amaladoss, “Joseph was a person very close to God. In today’s terms, we would say that he was a man of prayer” (Amaladoss, April 2021, 290). He was placing his complete trust in God that he could accept the mysteries involved in the virginal conception. Though he had an adamant time in traveling to Judea with Mary, who was about to give birth to her child, he could withstand such struggles because of his unwavering trust in God. He had a balanced relationship with the world by leading a simple life. Joseph’s work gave him Jesus, the identity “son of the carpenter.” Joseph’s style of work was so humble and essential that Jesus chose to appropriate it to himself (Toschi, 2012). Sister Gerard writes: “Although Joseph belonged to the Kingly family of David, he could not even afford to offer a lamb at the presentation of Jesus. Like the poor people, he could offer only two pigeons. He lived by his hard work and was not greedy or attached to wealth” (Vettukalumpurath, 2021).

**Formators as Righteous Fathers.** The formators should be righteous persons, having a right relationship with God, the other, and the world. Though they do not beget children physically by living such noble values, they will be fathers like Joseph the father and the heavenly father.

**Right Relationship with God.** The right relationship with God is manifested in his intense prayer life. A formator should be a man of prayer (Valiyakulathil, 2020). The Church reminds that the consecrated persons must be persons of prayer: “The call to holiness is accepted and can be cultivated only in the silence of adoration before the infinite transcendence of God” (Paul II, 1996). “They who make the profession of the evangelical counsels should seek and love above all else God who has first loved us (I Jn 4:10). In all circumstances, they should take care to foster a life hidden with Christ in God (Col 3:3), which is the source and stimulus of love of the neighbor, for the salvation of

the world and the building up of the Church” (*Perfectae Caritatis* in Flannery, 2007). A formator should be having an intense relationship with God to be reminded of the seriousness of his responsibility as taking care of the souls of the formees. The formees can learn from their formator about the necessity of prayer.

***Right Relationship with the Other.*** The formator should be an expert in interpersonal relationships. There should be quality in the relationship with his students. The formator and formees need to maintain mutual trust to change the formees positively. “A necessary element in the process of accompaniment is mutual trust. The formation program should explore and outline the concrete ways in which this trust can be encouraged and safeguarded. Above all, those conditions should be sought and fostered, which can, in some way, create a peaceful climate of trust and confidence: fraternity, empathy, understanding, the ability to listen and to share, and especially a coherent witness of life” (Congregation for the Clergy, 2017, §47). The candidates for religious life or priesthood should become experts in relating with others. “Love led Christ to the gift of self, even to the supreme sacrifice of the Cross. So too, among his disciples, there can be no true unity without that unconditional mutual love which demands a readiness to serve others generously, a willingness to welcome them as they are, without “judging” (Mt 7:1-2), and an ability to forgive up to “seventy times seven” (Mt 18:22). Many other Church documents emphasize the need of cultivating the quality to relate with others. The seminarians, permeated by a pastoral spirit, should be in the image of Christ. It will make them able to demonstrate the same compassion, generosity, love for all, especially for the poor, and zeal for the Kingdom that characterized the public ministry of the Son of God (Congregation for the Clergy, 2017, §119; Paul II, 1992, §57; Paul VI, 1965, §4).

***Right Relationship with the World.*** The formator must have a balanced relationship with the world. They can practise the vow of poverty and keep away from all kinds of attachments to worldly possessions. “Priests following the example of Christ, who rich though he was, became poor for love of us, should consider the poor and weakest as people entrusted in a special way to them. Therefore, they should be capable of witnessing to poverty with a simple and austere lifestyle, having learned the generous renunciation of superfluous things” (Paul II, 1992, §30). Fatherhood is manifested in his generous attitude towards the formees, especially when they require medical treatment

and the necessary things they may require for a decent life. An impartial attitude should be shown to the formee during times like the purchase of personal goods and other items for the use of the candidates.

## **Fatherhood and Discernment**

**Definition of Discernment.** Saint Ignatius defines discernment as:

the method of examination of conscience, meditation, contemplation, vocal or mental prayer, and other spiritual activities. For, just as taking a walk, travelling on foot, and running are physical exercises, so is the name of spiritual exercises given to any means of preparing and disposing our soul to rid itself of all its disordered affections and then, after their removal, of seeking and finding God's will in the ordering of our life for the salvation of our soul" (Loyola, 1914).

**Biblical Perspectives.** Though there is no direct mention of the discernment of the spirit in the Old Testament or the gospels, when it comes to Saint Paul there is an explicit expression where he says that one of the numerous gifts from the Holy Spirit to the early Church was "the power to distinguish one spirit from another" (1 Cor 12:10). Pope Francis reflecting on the gospel passage: "The sheep hear his voice, as he calls his own sheep by name" (John 10:3), emphasises the necessity of discernment in the life of the faithful:

The Lord calls us by name because He loves us. However, there are other voices not to be followed: those of strangers, thieves, and robbers who want evil for the sheep. The different voices resonate within us. There is the voice of God, who speaks kindly to the conscience, and there is the tempting voice that leads to evil. How can we recognize and distinguish the Good Shepherd's voice from that of the thief? We can learn to discern these two voices, which speak two different languages. They have opposite ways of knocking on our hearts. As we know how to distinguish one language from another, we can also distinguish the voice of God and the voice of the evil one. The voice of God never forces us: God proposes himself, he does not impose himself. Instead, the evil voice seduces, assails, forces: it arouses dazzling illusions, tempting emotions that are fleeting. At first, it flatters us, it makes us believe that we are all-powerful, but then leaves us with emptiness inside and accuses us: "You are worth nothing." God's voice, on the other hand, corrects us, with so much patience but always encourages us, consoles us: it always nourishes hope. The voice of God is a voice

that has a horizon, instead, the voice of the evil one leads you to a wall, it takes you to a corner (Francis, May 3, 2020).

**Joseph as a Discerning Father.** Discerning between the good and evil spirits is very important for an integrated life. Though there is no explicit reference to the discernment of the Spirit in the gospels, Joseph embodies that virtue all through his life. Through right discernment, Joseph made his fatherhood meaningful. By divine interventions, he could take the right decision in the crucial moments of his life. His courage to act according to the command of the Lord, helped him accept Mary as his wife and act to flee to Egypt when the life of the child was threatened. That is why he is presented as a ‘courageous father’ by Pope Francis in his apostolic letter *Patris Corde* (Francis, 2020).

The widespread translation for the word Joseph in Hebrew (Yôsēp) is ‘to increase.’ However, it can also mean ‘do more,’ ‘do again’ ‘continue doing’ etc (Koehler & Baumgartner, 1998). Joseph was a person though determined to dismiss Mary he reverses the decision and takes her as his wife. His willingness to ‘do again’ is manifested in his action. His disposition to ‘continue doing’ is evident in how he takes Mary as his wife and Jesus Christ as his son. He had all the possibility of being led by the other voice he heard in his heart. However, as he was open to the Spirit of God, he recognized the voice of God communicated to him through the angel and he obeyed it.

**Formator as a Discerning Father.** One of the most essential tasks of the formator is his right discernment concerning the formation of his students. It is a serious responsibility as it affects the lives of many individuals undergoing formation. It is to be exercised correctly in intense prayer, reflection and dialogue.

In the discernment process, the formator should be spending sufficient time in prayer, however, it doesn’t mean only just reciting some prayer and getting satisfied in that but it demands a close relationship with God. Pope Francis says “The Christian life is to remain in God, following the Holy Spirit and not the spirit of the world, which leads to corruption and does not distinguish good from the evil” (Francis, January 7 2020). To make the right discernment, the formator should also periodically update him by reading and equipping him with fruitful input sessions. Persistent intellectual updating is expected of him. Mariadas (2017) says:

Today's world, "which is marked by religious indifference" and pluralism, is immersed in the challenges raised by scientific innovations and, therefore, it demands a lot from its leaders, especially from priests. In such situations, a priest without sufficient intellectual formation cannot make good judgment and discern the values of the Kingdom of God from a sea of contrary value systems.

Many are misled by the false information that is spread through social media. The formator should be a man of conviction and values to make the right choices in his life. Another important aid for making discernment is to have a dialogue with the term members involved in the formation and with the candidates. The aspect of dialogue gets a lot of prominence in the context in which the Church reflects seriously on the synodality. Pope Francis proposes three steps in this process, namely; encounter, listen and discernment (Francis, October 10, 2021). The formator must be open enough to encounter and listen then only he will be able to make the right discernment.

### **Fatherhood and Hard Work**

**Joseph as the Working Father.** One of the most favourite attributes of Joseph is that he was a worker; a carpenter. In the year 1955 on May 1, by instituting the feast of Joseph the worker on May 1, Pope Pius XII said: "By family ties, daily communion, spiritual harmony, and divine grace, Joseph, of David's line, was more closely bonded to Jesus, than was any other man, and yet he was a humble worker." Joseph role as a worker was recognized and praised by Pope Leo XIII in the Encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (Leo XII, 1891). Pope John Paul II testifies that the work of Joseph was an expression of his love in the life of the family of Nazareth (Paul II, 1989). Pope Francis praises Joseph as a worker: "Saint Joseph was a carpenter who earned an honest living to provide for his family. From him, Jesus learned the value, the dignity and the joy of what it means to eat bread that is the fruit of one's labour" (Francis, 2020). Toschi (2012) observes the work of Joseph was so special: "Not only did Joseph's work give him the means for supporting his family, but it also became part of Jesus' education." So much so that Jesus learned to work with his hands in the same profession and became known as "the carpenter" (Mk 6:3).

**Formator as the Working Father.** The fatherhood of the formator is to be realized by doing hard work. More than physical work, it requires working hard in all the realms to glorify God. He should be working

hard intellectually, mentally, physically, spiritually, and pastorally. Anyone who is participating in the discipleship of Jesus Christ must be following the commandments of Jesus, namely “love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself” (Lk 10:27). He must have to love the Lord with an undivided heart (Ps 86:11). To love the Lord with all the soul, the formator must be the spiritually enlightened person, and to love the Lord with all the strength, one must be physically fit and engage in physical labor. The formator must be an emotionally mature person to love the Lord with all his mind.

***Working Formator as a Model for Formees.*** It is a fact that those who are physically generating children are compelled to work for the family’s sustenance. However, as the formators are not physical fathers, they may not feel the compulsion to do the physical work to take care of the needs of the formees, as the congregation or the community provides it. But for the candidates, the working Formator would be a model to follow, and his presence will have an incredible influence on them. Such a formator will be personally connected with the students as he does something very personal for them. The formator should be able to work with them in the garden work and other manual work which will help cultivate a sense of belongingness to the community.

***Working Formator as an Eco-friendly Father.*** Another important formative value communicated through such initiatives from the part of the formator is caring for the earth, which is being very much emphasised by Pope Francis (2015) in his encyclical *Laudato Si’*. Reflecting on the expression “till and keep” in Gen 2:15, he writes:

Tilling, refers to cultivating, ploughing or working, while “keeping” means caring, protecting, overseeing and preserving. This implies a relationship of mutual responsibility between human beings and nature. Each community can take whatever it needs for subsistence from the earth’s bounty, but it also has to protect the earth and ensure its fruitfulness for coming generations (Francis, 2015, §67).

By work, a person can glorify God in their life. When Jesus was criticized for healing on Sabbath, Jesus answered them, “My Father is still working, and I also am working” (Jn 5:17). St. Paul says: “We did not eat anyone’s bread without paying for it, but with toil and labor we worked night and day so that we might not burden any of you” (The 3:2).

**Working Formator as Practising Poverty.** A working formator is also a model in practising the vow of poverty. Poverty becomes meaningful when a person can make others rich by sparing what he/she has. Jesus became poor to become rich (2 Cor 8:9). To make others rich a person should work hard and earn so that what they earn would be shared with those who are in need. During the formation, the formees should be trained to work hard in the garden or would engage in similar activities that they may earn to share the same with the poor and the needy.

### **Fatherhood and Selflessness**

**Joseph as a Father in Shadows.** St Joseph and the boy Jesus kept a famous oil painting in France's Louvre Museum. The painting is of the 17th century by Georges de La Tour. The picture portrays Joseph working on a late evening. It has become dark. However, he is accompanied by boy Jesus who holds a lighted candle in which the face of Joseph and some essential materials he uses for his work are made visible. Joseph was invisible in the darkness; however, he was visible to the public in the light of his son. The picture symbolically communicates a powerful message: it was through Jesus that the identity of Joseph was revealed. That is why Pope Francis calls Joseph a father in the shadows (Francis, 2020, §7). Joseph never made himself the centre of things. He did not think of himself but focused instead on the lives of Mary and Jesus (Amaladoss, April 2021, 292).

**Formators as Fathers in Shadows.** Several members are reluctant to take up the responsibility of being a Formator because they find it to be a thankless job. It may be due to their complexes, craving for appreciation and acceptance from the formees, superiors and others. A successful formator experiences fatherhood by maintaining a healthy relationship with the candidates. He sacrifices his life for the growth of the formees. They get a sense of fulfillment in doing their duty and are not easily frustrated. Some formators without an integrated personality become possessive of their students and sometimes claim it imprudently. Pope Francis observes that; "in every exercise of our fatherhood, we should always keep in mind that it has nothing to do with possession, but rather a 'sign' pointing to a greater fatherhood" (Francis, 2020, §7).

To become popular among students, some formators try to please them by a very lenient approach towards them, especially in matters of discipline. Some others may be very partial in approaching a few

students by compromising the common norms. Usually, the candidates may not get proper correction and guidance in such situations. Leaving the formees to develop on their own is not a responsible attitude of the formator. The formators should be selfless persons to be effective formators. Pope Francis says: “We are like Joseph: a shadow of the heavenly Father, who makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust” (Mt5:45). And a shadow that follows his Son” (Francis, 2020, §7). They should have an attitude which Jesus expected from his disciples; “So you also, when you have done all that you were ordered to do, say, we are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done” (Lk 17:10).

## Conclusion

The study on the role of Joseph as a father and the role of formator as a father has brought into light the greatness of Joseph, who accepted such a responsibility as the plan of God. He is a just man fulfilling his obligations to God meticulously, others, and the world, as a person making proper discernment for the benefit of the society than for his selfish motives. He is also a person who engages meaningfully to enrich the world and selflessly exercises his fatherhood without expecting anything in return. In the plan of God, such responsible fatherhood is a necessity for the integral growth of any person in this world. Candidates under the formation, aspiring to become religious or priests, are distant from their physical fathers. The formator’s role is to become a merciful father who consistently accompanies the formee. For all Formators around the world, St. Joseph is a model for fatherhood who exercised his fatherhood, though he was not the physical father of Jesus.

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## Psychological Problems of Priests and Religious - Risk Factors and Coping Mechanism

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### Abstract

Candidates who currently seek admission in seminaries and religious formation houses come with many assets and liabilities. Advertising Commercials and movies that use sex, individualism, and consumerism have warped their understanding of vows, celibacy, and sex. Some formees have already engaged in sexual activity before entering the seminary and struggle with psychological issues. In formation, they understand the importance of the Priesthood and religious life. Still, they undergo lots of emotional and psychological changes to come to terms with their roles and responsibilities in practicality. Therefore, psychological problems of priests and religious and their challenges are presented in this article: relationship conflicts, loneliness, internet addiction, spiritual dryness, suicidal tendencies, and the psychological and scientific techniques needed to meet these challenges are also proposed.

*Keywords:* Emotional Wellness, Spiritual Maturity, Psychosexual Integration

### Introduction

In today's technologically fast-tracking globalizing world, "most people join consecrated life at a very young age, in late adolescence or early adulthood" (Antony, Joan 2021). For a large part of their young life, they exist in a world secluded from the real struggles of life like fending for themselves food, shelter, medicine, personal achievements

and targets to be met, challenges of worldly experiences, of relationships with persons with extremely varied attitudes, cocooned from day-to-day interactions with the opposite gender, lacking many life skills and thus resulting in lacking the experience of the world at large the list can go on. “Some of the adolescents come to consecrated life after experiencing child abuse, addicted to porn, alcoholism, chronic masturbation, and other hidden issues”(Parappully, 2011; Briere, 1996), and which can create psychological problems among consecrated men and women. Some of these issues can be found reported in the media as well. Hence, this article highlights the psychological problems of the Priesthood and religious life, the risk factors, and coping mechanisms.

Priests and nuns have long years of formation before taking perpetual vows or being ordained. They fall into psychological problems even with such training and other spiritual exercises. “Analyzing this problem in the light of Freudian psychoanalysis (Freud, 1976) and Erick Ericson’s developmental theory (Erickson, 1964) can depict their life script, which might include poor family background, negative environmental and inappropriate parental care” (Rossette, 2011). “Therefore, the candidates for the priesthood must be thoroughly screened, especially their personality, cognitive, behavioral and psychosexual maturity traits”(United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2019; The John Jay College of Criminal Justice, 2004, 2011; Plante & Lackey, 2007).“When they are accepted into the seminary, the formators must play a major role in the making of the formees; helping them with solid spirituality, cognitive-behavioral, psychotherapy, motivational, dialogue, and sex therapies” (Parappully, 2006). If they find in the formative period that the formee is powerless to handle themselves, they need to be counseled to discern more a suitable vocation. When the candidates are not adequately assessed, they will undoubtedly encounter problems in their consecrated lives, deficiently affecting the Church. To diminish this ill effect, the promotion of renewed attentiveness in the selection of vocations for the priests and religious are highly needed. Some modern-day priests and religious women face common psychological problems: 1. Relationship Conflicts. 2. Loneliness 3. Internet Addiction 4. Spiritual Dryness 5. Suicidal Tendency.

### **Relationship Conflicts**

Pannikar (1993), in his Cosmotheandric vision, mentions the triangular relationship of God to Man to Nature. When the relationship is strong in these three aspects, no conflict arises among individuals. When

it deviates, problems will arise. Therefore, relationship plays an essential role in human and priestly life; unfortunately, some priests fail to enjoy the company of their fellow priests. A significant finding of Rossetti's research was that priests lack relationship skills with other priests. As a result, this causes them to burn out in their field, and 42% of priests accept that they fail in relationships (Rossetti, p.120). "Lack of relationship skills causes psychological illness. One of them is Borderline Personality Disorder, which is a pattern of instability in interpersonal relationships and self-image and causes marked impulsivity" (DSM-IV.TR, 2005). Appearing emotionally stable at one moment, the borderline personality can suddenly become intensely angry, depressed, anxious, or questioning identity, goals, and values. Impulsive, unpredictable, and intense verbal outbursts and threats, as well as physical displays of temper or self-damaging acts, including suicide attempts and self-mutilation, are characteristic of this personality.

### **Loneliness**

Psychologist Rook defines loneliness as: "An enduring condition of an emotional state that arises when a person feels estranged from is misunderstood or rejected by, and/or lacks appropriate social partner for the desired activity." Oxford Dictionary defines "loneliness as a feeling of depression resulting from being alone or having no companions."

Similarly, Fitzgibbons (September 1989), in his article *Identifying, Resolving Loneliness in Priestly Life*, mentions

"loneliness as one of the most painful of all human experiences. Driven, consciously or unconsciously, to escape its pain, many priests pursue some type of consolation, emotional high companionship, or warmth. To warm the body, some priests may take drinks and drugs. It might console them temporarily. Other behaviours, which are attempts to rise above loneliness, include chronic masturbation, pornography, heterosexual or homosexual acting out, voyeurism, paedophilia, and a preoccupation with dirty jokes, and sexting."

More compulsive behaviors include compulsive television watching, eating, shopping, exercising, and smoking. "These bad habits raise the level of neuro-chemicals in the brain such as oxytocin, vasopressin, dopamine, norepinephrine, endorphins and serotonin which can lead to chronic addiction" (Wendy & Maltz, 2008; Wilson, 2014 ).

Subsequently, loneliness can cause Dependent Personality Disorder, a pattern of submissive and clinging behavior related to an excessive need to be taken care of (DSM-IV-TR, 2005). Individuals with dependent personality styles have a pervasive need to cling to more assertive personalities, fearing isolation and being alone. Thus, they hold on to their superiors and peers. If their peers or superiors reject them, they may experience clinical depression and anxiety.

### **Internet addiction**

Pope Pius XII, in his encyclical letter *Prorsus* (1957), the Pastoral Instruction on the Means of Social Communication *Communio et Progressio*, (1971), underlined that: “The Church sees these media as ‘gifts of God’ which, following His providential design, unite men in brotherhood and so help them to cooperate with His plan for their salvation.” The Church also needs to understand and use the internet as a communication tool to all persons of goodwill. Unfortunately, “misuse of the internet can cause addiction among many religious and clergy and damage their vocation to the priesthood or religious life” (Putnam & Maheu 2000).

Parappully (2006) mentions that “There is an explosion of Internet use, part of which is online pornographic pursuits. Sexually oriented chat rooms draw a large number of Internet users. Seminarians and priests are part of the growing number of online pornography addicts” (Tellis, 2013, p. 37; Putnam & Maheu 2000). And pornography can cause personality disorder in the person. Therefore, religious and priests must use the internet for noble purposes. “Any seminarian involved in sexual acts should be referred for proficient assessment and counseling. Otherwise, he will become an unsuccessful pastor and a sex addict” (Rossetti 2011).

### **Spiritual Dryness**

Spiritual dryness in the Priesthood and religious life has been described as spiritual lethargy, a lack of vibrant spiritual encounters with God, and an absence of spiritual resources, such as spiritual renewal practices and a lack of positive spiritual feelings. Spirituality and Health (2013) magazine published an article that mentioned that 60% of priests experienced spiritual dryness in their life. Similarly, Rossetti (2011) says, “in America among Priests ‘feelings of “spiritual dryness” was experienced occasionally by up to 40%, often or even regularly by up to 13%.” Shockingly, spiritual dryness causes purposelessness, failure

to handle emotions, lack of moral judgment, moral competence, moral identity, feelings of depression, and addiction of various kinds. If this condition prevails among priests and religious people for an extended period, they can leave the priestly and spiritual life.

### **Suicidal Tendency**

There are a few instances of priests and nuns taking their own lives in the middle of their consecrated life. The value of life is less respected in modern society. Some of the data on suicide by priests and religious<sup>1</sup>:

1. 19<sup>th</sup> June 2019- Assam
2. 11<sup>th</sup> October 2019- Karnataka
3. 7<sup>th</sup> May 2020- Kerala
4. 20<sup>th</sup> June 2020- Andhra Pradesh
5. 22<sup>nd</sup> June 2020- Kerala
6. 1<sup>st</sup> July 2020- Tamil Nadu
7. 1<sup>st</sup> December 2021- Punjab

Other than these cited cases, several unreported cases of priests and nuns who committed suicide. The question here is why religious men do, and women commit suicide? It is still an unsolved puzzle, but we can deduce a lack of resilience, self-discipline and weak relationship with God and fellow community members, and a candidate's childhood hurtful memories as factors leading to suicide.

### **Recommendation**

1. "To develop and maintain affective maturity and to live priestly and religious celibacy joyfully and fruitfully, the FABC recommend the following: persevering and regular prayer life, development of deeper self-awareness and appropriate expression of feelings; cultivation of knowledge of sexuality which is appropriate and helps counterbalances over-idealization and idolization of sexualized behavior. They should also be encouraged to seek spiritual guidance and individual counseling, not only when wounds from the past affect current life and ministry. Compassion and commitment to pastoral ministry to others are also a great help for transforming human passion and attractions into the love of Christ. Regular practices of confession, solitude, a meditation on and union with Christ, and filial devotion to Mary are recommended" (Federation of Asian Bishops Conference, 2013).

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<sup>1</sup> The names are removed to protect the identity of the priest/religious

2. “The traditional elements of a priest’s spiritual life are essential:  
1. Receive the Sacrament of Penance frequently 2. Pray each day privately; consider a daily Holy Hour Pray the Liturgy of the Hours daily 3. Regularly do theological and spiritual reading 4. Take an annual retreat 5. Foster devotion to Mary.

All of these were directly and significantly related to psychological and spiritual well-being. Moreover, several priests wrote on their surveys how important their sacramental ministry was to them, especially the Eucharist. Thus, I would add to that list: deepen one’s love of and connection to the Eucharist” (Rossetti, 2011).

### **Why are Priests and Religious are prone to fall into Psychological Problems?**

Sipe (1995) examines the causes of many psychological and sexual problems of priests and religious struggling to live a celibate life and presents an excellent historical background of those same struggles in the past 2000 years. Subsequently, he provides their psychological problems, dividing them into four categories.

**The Genetic Lock.** For some sexual offenders, the object of sexual attraction is genetically determined much as their gender (sexual orientation and level of sexual drive) is. Biogenetic factors determine the sexual behavior of these people. Certain people are genetically predisposed to sexual attraction to a particular age group by analogy to mental/intellectual capacity. From the time of their birth, certain persons will never attain “normal” adult intellectual levels of function. “When these priests become sexually active, they might be pedophiles or hebephiles” (Rossette 2019).

**The Psychodynamic Lock.** Another group of men seems to have unmet childhood needs coupled with early sexual over-stimulation and experiences conspire to lock the person at one level of psychosexual development or make him highly vulnerable to regression to sexual attraction to minors. Psychological factors can be powerful enough to arrest or lock someone into a stage of development or may make persons of a certain age overvalued and over-invested as sexual objects.

**The Social/Situational Lock.** The third group of men abuse children and women whose predominant lock is social/situational. They fit well into clerical culture. They play by the Church’s rules. Even though they have taken a vow of celibacy, they are not inwardly convinced of this vow.

**The Moral Lock.** There is also another group of men who sexually abuse minors and others. They coldly, calculatingly, by design involve themselves sexually with minors because they want to; they choose it, not compulsively, indiscriminately, or impulsively. What they do is make a moral choice to sin?

### **Therapies to Help Cope with Psychological Problems**

Psychological, Spiritual, and religious therapies and practices are often associated with healthier living and positive health outcomes. This includes positive health behaviors and practices, enhanced ability to cope with stressors, including many illnesses, and even lower all-cause mortality rates among reasonably healthy Priests and religious. “Spiritual and religious involvement is closely associated with better social, emotional, and mental health, such as lower levels of depression, anxiety, as well as better self-esteem, marital stability and life satisfaction, happiness, and perceived well-being. Importantly, studies are also reporting that psychology, spirituality, and religious engagement relates to positive qualities and personal strengths and character factors, including positive emotions and behaviors, such as forgiveness, hope, and volunteering to serve others” (Plante & Thoresen, 2007). Therefore, to serve the clients, there are different kinds of scientific therapeutic methods, tools, and religious practices as follows:

1. Cognitive behavioral therapy
2. Dialectical behavior therapy
3. Rational emotive therapy
4. Eight-point program of Passage meditation
5. Personal intensive Journal writing method
6. The Ignatian examen Prayer Method
7. Sobriety Plan Method
8. Catholic Mindfulness therapy
9. Psychodynamic Psychotherapy
10. Logotherapy.

Among all methods, a few practical therapeutic methods are explained below.

### **The Ignatian Examen Prayer Method**

The Examen is a 500-year-old end-of-day prayer developed by St. Ignatius of Loyola, founder of the Society of Jesus (better known as the Jesuits). Like many other religious or spiritual practices, such as mindfulness and yoga, “the Examen is suitable as either a spiritually-focused or secular intervention strategy to assist people within clinical psychotherapy practice and elsewhere. Adapting the Examen as a cognitive-behavioral psychotherapy intervention is easy to do and may add another important tool to the toolbox of practicing clinicians interested in thoughtfully integrating spiritually based approaches in



their clinical work with religiously as well as non- religiously minded clients” (Plante 2021).

It is a prayer, not a tabulation of sins; is a God-centered exercise; is a prayer suited to all ages and all walks of life; and is oriented to a process of discernment, discerning the presence of God in daily life. It is recommended to do it at least twice a day for about 15 minutes.

### **The five steps of Examen Prayer**

**Thanksgiving.** Thank God for all the benefits received during the day. Begin prayer with an attitude of gratitude, being grateful to God who created you and who sustains your life. “It is not happiness that makes us grateful; it is gratefulness that makes us happy.” David Steindl Rast(1984).

**Prayer for light.** This is a petition for light to appreciate the blessings of God as well as to see one’s failings in the light of faith. Without God’s light, one will not see the subtle deceptions in life.

**Review the day.** Look at the day and see where God has been active and where the Lifeline leads me. As a God-centered activity, one’s approach will be “where God was during the day and how have been cooperating with or resisting such invitation.” (David, 1984)One can see the shadows in thought-word-deed and interior movements with God’s light. Is there a toxic situation within me? Did I become an agent of reconciliation and peace today? Did I reflect on the character of God in my life and work today? Did I find God in my work, in my neighbor, in the needy? Who was the center of my life today?

**Reconcile and Resolve.** Accept and own one’s shortcomings, Take responsibility for actions, ask pardon from the Lord for failings, resistances, and lack of generosity. Ask pardon for losing sight of the presence of the Divine during the day, for forgetting ‘great benefits received,’ or for making someone the center of my life.

**Hope for the Future.** Conclude the examen with a firm resolution to respond to God better, always with His grace. Look towards the future with hope – the hope of finding God in activities and with the hope of responding to the invitation of the Spirit. Conclude with an Our Father or any other appropriate prayer.

## **Personal Intensive Journal**

Progoff (1921-1998) was the godfather of the contemporary journal-writing movement, which has blossomed in the last couple of decades. He says, "Writing in a journal about one's ideas, feelings and experience are almost useful, but an unstructured journal usually just goes around in circles" (Progoff 1992). He suggested "to become a valuable tool of psychological self-care, a journal needs a design that will help a human being answer the question of what his/her life is trying to become" (Progoff 1992). Further, he recommended 12 psychotherapeutic techniques that help get rid of the psychological problems.

**Things to Remember Progoff Techniques.** Label and date all your journal entries with the month, day, and year. Don't destroy what you write. It might not seem to make much sense today, but next week or next month, or next year it may prove to be very valuable. Your journal can chart your experiences in the medical sense of the word. Cumulative entries can show patterns that may help you understand yourself better or provide suggestions for writing in other journal sections.

**Period Log.** Begin by writing "It has been a time in which," and describe inner and outer events that come to mind about the most recent period in your life. This helps you place yourself within "the rhythm of time." (Progoff 1992)

To write in the Period Log: 1. Sit in silence, allowing your mind to travel back over this period in your life. Let it take shape within you. You'll probably have about 45 minutes to do this entry if you're writing in a group. 2. Focus more specifically on the contents of this recent period and write about them. Write the memories and facts of your experiences without judgment and censorship. Record the specific contents but not the details of this period. This is an outline picture and an overview of this recent time in your life. Write simply and briefly.

**Twilight Imagery Log.** Sit quietly, with eyes closed, and let you feel the content of the period just described. Relax and let imagery, impressions, and symbols form in your mind. When you are ready, record them. This gives you an interior perspective on your life.

**Stepping stones.** List about a dozen key points that have occurred throughout your life. Select meaningful emotional, physical, occupational, and relational milestones. This gives you a sense of continuity and a picture of your life as a whole. Be open to surprises.

**Intersections.** Roads Taken and Not Taken. Select one steppingstone that marks when you made an important choice (avoid the most recent). Begin by writing “It was a time when,” and record your impressions and recollections. This may help you sort out unresolved issues since “things we regret don’t die - they go underground.”

**Life History Log.** Read your “intersections” entry and let it stir specific memories – in detail – about that period. This is a place for collecting past experiences without judgment or interpretation.

**Daily Log.** Think back over the past 24 hours and trace moods, concerns, and thoughts. This is an ongoing record of what is happening to you and a meaningful way to track your awareness. Avoid judging yourself. In the seeing comes the understanding.

**Dream Log.** Jot down dreams as you recall them – without analysis or interpretation. Dreams often contain valuable information about our life, but awareness takes time to surface.

**Dialogue with Persons.** Pick someone living or dead of inner importance to your life. Write a statement describing the relationship, then list their life steppingstones. Read the entry and record whatever it stirs in you, beginning with the statement, “As I consider your life, I feel ...” (Progoff, 1999). Write the person’s response and continue the dialogue.

**Dialogue with Works.** Pick an activity you care about, and write down your thoughts and feelings about your relationship with it. List the steppingstones in the life of this work as if it were a person; speak to it and let it respond. Read over the dialogue and record your reactions. This helps clarify your relationship to work

**Dialogue with the Body.** List some remembrances of bodily experiences throughout your life, such as times of strength and accomplishment, illness, sensuality, athletics, food, and drug use. Read over the list and write what stirs within you. Let your body speak. This helps you connect with your physical experience, dialogue with the body, a part of the body, a symptom, a condition, a feeling.

**Inner Wisdom Dialogue.** Pick a person you consider wise, a teacher, counselor, parent, author, spiritual figure. Imagine that person’s presence, speak to them about your concerns and record the discussion. This can lead to significant behavioral and spiritual insights.

**Now.** The open moment briefly states a vision, prayer, or plan for the next period or stage in your life. This will help you focus on where you are going, sometimes with intense emotional clarity.

### **Eight-Point Program of Passage Meditation (PM) and Contemporary Challenges**

Program of passage meditation was first systematized and taught at the University of California Berkeley during the 1960s by Fulbright scholar Easwaran (1910–99) to support students entering professional life. “Thousands of practitioners of all religious faiths, as well as nonreligious seekers, have used PM throughout the United States and elsewhere to help them deepen their spirituality and manage the stresses of contemporary life with greater clarity and calm. The PM program has been used in college and seminary education, substance abuse recovery, and psychotherapy” (Plante, 2010). Translations of PM instruction materials by independent publishers appear in more than 20 languages in two dozen countries in North and South America, Europe, and Asia. But possibly because the appeal of PM cuts across and transcends the most common categories of religious and sectarian identity, it has only intermittently appeared on lists of popular meditation practices such as Transcendental Meditation, Vipassana, and Zen meditation.

### **Sobriety Plan Method by strive Organization**

The sobriety Plan is introduced by Fraddis, the founder of the striving online mission. His mission is to help people overcome porn and internet addiction; moreover, it is a twenty-one-day program. Fradd (2017) narrates steps to identify healthy behaviors that keep one from living a good and happy life. Subsequently, the author reflects on the Three Circles mentioned below, which can help move towards a healthy and holistic life.

1. Inner Circle (*Setbacks/Falls*). Write in a diary and list the ways you can fall sexually. Examples may include watching porn, masturbation, and adultery so that it could be easy to know the triggers and take preventive methods to cure the problems.
2. Middle Circle (*Unhealthy Behaviours*). It is the second phase; in this step, list the unhealthy behaviors that generally lead you into the inner circle (toward a setback). Examples: 1. Drinking Alcohol 2. Social Media 3. Watching movies late at night.

#### 4. Outer Circle (*Healthy Behaviors*)

Skinner (1965) describes “a reaction sequence that begins when you are in a vulnerable place from that position of vulnerability; there is a pattern of thoughts, subconscious action, and reaction that will inevitably lead the path of addiction.” And outer circle has four layers, in which one needs to carefully examine each layer to heal the inner wounds through positive habits with scientific counseling methods.

1. Spiritual - This circle requires prayer, mindfulness techniques, mantra recitation, and other spiritual methods to evade preoccupied ideas and unholy thoughts.
2. Physical – It requires healthy exercises, a moderate lifestyle, and taking care of one’s body as God’s temple instead of indulging in unhealthy behaviors.
3. Emotional - It requires understanding the unhealthy emotions with maturity and integrates it by engaging in music, gardening, reading books, and spiritual direction.
4. Relational- which requires developing good and qualitative relationships with family, friends, and the community where we live to avoid isolation and loneliness.

#### **Conclusion**

“No man should become a priest without a psychological evaluation proving he is suited to a life of chastity,” says Pope Francis” (Zauzmer, 2019); the reason why some of the psycho-social problems among priests and religious exists are due to significant psychological baggage (Rosetti, 2011; Arndt, 1991). As priests, men and women who come from dysfunctional childhoods and have mental health problems, sexual conflicts, and narcissistic traits are more likely to be unhappy. Therefore, screening and formation of candidates can alleviate some of these psycho-social problems (USCCB 2019; The John Jay College of Criminal Justice, 2004-2011; Plante & Lackey, 2007). If a formee feels that he has uncontrollable negative feelings and is fragile to challenge the psychological problem, he should be given spiritual help. The saints of our Church had different unpleasant encounters, but they handled their priestly and religious life following the will of God. Neuroscience teaches about neuroplasticity in our brain- with effort we can change our negative behavior into positive (Huberman, 2021). Amidst all the possible help rendered to the formee to change their behavior, if the

candidate is neglectful and indifferent to the priestly and religious call, he should have the courage to walk out of the priestly life. Unfortunately, many priests feel that they do not have their support. They live alone, with limited or insufficient access to brothers priests to share the load of ministry and have peer support necessary not to feel left alone in emotional isolation. Whenever circumstances demand priests should seek mental and emotional well-being support, they should not feel ashamed to seek help (Rossetti, 2005) to lead their priestly and religious life happily and bring blessings to those they serve.

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## Last but not Least: Religion and Meaning of Life

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During the two years that the COVID-19 pandemic raged through the world and made people question their lives and circumstances, one of the biggest questions that remained was whether religion matters. Religion of all forms was hit hard with the closure of places of worship and fellowship. Leaders like Pope Francis urged people to remember their duties as Christians in the Christian community. With *Amoris Laetitia*, he spoke about the importance of the Church and the community coming together to help each other to strengthen our faith community's foundation.

Some studies suggest that religion can help and harm families (Barter & Zatin-Osburn, 2014). As people question their religious belief and whether it has meaning in their lives, the Last thought for this edition focuses on some empirical literature that points to the connection between religion and purpose in life (Park 2005).

1. Role of meaning-making in coping: Meaning in life depends on purpose, efficacy, value, and self-worth (Baumeister, 1991). One of the ways of understanding the process of coping is the meaning-making coping model. Theorists have proposed that this model helps study adjustment to major trauma and loss (Mikulincer & Florian, 1996). The model posits that there is a Global belief that are basic internal cognitive structures that people construct about the nature of the world. These internal representations of desired outcomes can motivate people in their lives. They have appraised meaning like God's will, or act of coincidence, about events in their life like a loss, threat, challenge, or about decisions regarding the ways to cope with an event.



According to the mode, to cope with distress in life, individuals must either adjust their views of the events or revise their goals and beliefs about the world to cater to the new information. For example, with the untimely loss of a loved one, there can be more distress in an individual. The individual is now in an uncomfortable state of a discrepancy between their appraised and global meaning, which involves losing control, predictability, or comprehension of the world. To recover from the distress, they should adjust either of their processes. Changes in appraised meaning can lead to lower levels of depression or higher levels of subjective well-being (Park, Cohen, & Murch, 1996). Thus, in the scenario mentioned above, the person believes that they see the hand of a loving God as being responsible for the event. They may evolve in the process of meaning-making mechanism (Baumeister, 1991). Religion is thus a meaning system that can significantly influence the process of meaning-making coping.

2. Religion as a meaning system: Religion can be defined as a “search for significance in ways related to the sacred” (Pargament, 1997, p. 32). It is argued that religion grew out of a human need for comprehending the most profound problems of our existence (Geertz, 1996). As religion acts as an individual’s core schema, informed belief about the self and the world, and provide an understanding of mundane and extraordinary occurrences (Spilka, Hood, Hunsberger, & Gorsuch, 2003), religion hence is central to the life purpose of many people (Pargament, 1997).

Studies among older adults have shown that they rely on religion more as a source of comfort and significance. Despite evidence that the relationship between religiousness and life satisfaction is small (Diener & Clifton, 2002), there are consistent positive correlations between religiousness and well-being. Intrinsic religious orientation and religious involvement had an indirect effect on subjective well-being.

3. Religion and meaning-making are coping: It is highly likely that an individual for whom religion is a highly salient aspect of their understanding of self and world would be far more likely to use coping than those who are less devout (Pargament, 1997). Religion has its most significant impact by helping restore beliefs that the world is safe, predictable, fair, controllable, and even that a benevolent God is in charge of it all (Dull & Skokan, 1995).

Religion can thus be involved in helping a person in a stressful situation by allowing them to see the positive aspects that came to be from the stressful situation and by providing a means to make more benign reattributions. For example, often, people come to believe that the stressful event is the will of a loving God, even if God is beyond human understanding (Park & Cohen, 1992). Pargament (1997) had described that religion has the power to transform the meaning of events: “When the sacred is seen working its will in life’s events, what first seems random, nonsensical and tragic is changed to be with God, a challenge to help others grow, or a loving act meant to prevent something worse from taking place” (p. 223).

Meaning in life is a crucial element of coping and psychological well-being among people trying to cope with life’s challenges and difficulties (Krok, 2015). Evidence suggests that the adjustment outcome of religious meaning-making coping is often positive. Pargament (1997) pointed out how people who believe in a fair, just, benevolent, loving God were associated with a greater sense of well-being. Stress-related growth is also often of a religious matter- positive changes in coping skills, relationships, life perspective are common after a stressful event. Though there can be initial disturbances in the individual due to the questioning of their global beliefs, there is an overall positive reappraisal that can decrease long-term distress.

Especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, where deep losses were felt around the world with the loss of loved ones, loss of a secure job or a stable income, loss of personal space and identity, there is an increase in the level of distress, anxiety, stress, and depression among the community. Resilience is the ability of the individual to withstand setbacks, adapt positively, and bounce back from adversity (Luthar & Cicchetti, 2001). Since religion has a relationship with stress-related growth, studies have been done on its impact on resilience. A survey on health-care workers (Chang, Chen, Lee, Lin, Chiang, Tsai, Kuo, & Lung, 2021) found that those with a form of religiousness- Christians or Catholics- perceived better psychological well-being, and Buddhists or Taoists were less likely to experience mental distress, which would indirectly increase their level of happiness.

## **Implications**

The diverse and robust influence of religious meaning-making coping on the well-being and functioning of the individual indicates the importance of implication in clinical or counseling work and pastoral care. Religion can play a significant role throughout an individual's life, especially during stressful life experiences.

Pastoral care, lay ministry, and faith community can encourage the people of faith to be a part of religious understanding of the self, world, and God. Such fellowships provide a much-needed support group that individuals or families can rely upon during times of distress. Often, it is the lack of a support group or a shoulder to cry on that is lacking in a grieving person's life. Counseling work during pastoral care can focus on helping the individual come to make meaning out of their suffering by reflecting on the teaching of their religion. The larger cultural and religious institutions can thus provide a great deal of support and structure for individuals to conduct themselves and run to during times of crisis.

There is also a need for the Church community to extend aid to the health workers and the health care system. By ensuring that the people are aware of the safety precautions and follow safety procedures in places of worship or fellowships, they can ensure that fewer people get sick and the health-care system's burden is reduced. The health-care professional who spends a large amount of their time and energy treating other people while having less regard for their own lives need to be cared for and respected. Other than monetary aids or funds to help the health-care system, the Church can ensure that any support in terms of being there for them in the mental and physical stress, a word of encouragement, and thanksgiving can go a long way to encouraging them.

While giving care and support to families in distress, pastors and priests have to realize that their religiousness regarding a sense of significance and purpose should result in autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relations with others, and self-acceptance (Krok, 2015). Also, this can be used to explore the personal goal systems of an individual as priests accompany the individual or family through a struggle. Overall, the Church needs to stick together and support each other through religion's meaning-making process.

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