

The Formee as a Silent One

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Abstract

In this article, the author reflects on the Lord's method of formation of Joseph, the husband of Mary and the foster-father of Jesus. Predicaments: finding the betrothed with child, journey to Bethlehem, fleeing to Egypt, returning to Judea, and disappearance of boy Jesus. The Formator helped him to positively respond and to grow into divine maturity. Another method: bringing joy and bliss.

Keywords: Formation, Predicaments, Divine maturity

Introduction

After reflecting on the divine pedagogy of formation in the Old Testament we now turn our attention to the formees in the New Testament. First, we take the case of Joseph.

Texts

(Angel Gabriel was sent by God to the village of Nazareth) "To a virgin engaged to a man named Joseph of the house of David" (Lk. 1:26-27).

Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph before they came together, she was found to be with child, through the Holy Spirit.

Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to send her away quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an Angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said: “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son and you are to give him the name Jesus because he will save his people from their sins.” All these took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: ‘the virgin shall conceive and will give birth to a son, and they shall name him Immanuel – which means, ‘God with us’. When Joseph woke up, he did what the Angel of the Lord had commanded him, and took Mary as his wife. But he knew her not until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus (Mt.1:18-25).

So Joseph also went up from the village of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem, the village of David, because he has descended from the house and family of David. He went there to be registered with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him, and was expecting a child (Lk.2:4-5).

“So they (shepherds) hurried off and found Mary and Joseph and the baby who was lying in the manger” (Lk. 2:16).

“Moved by the Spirit Simeon went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required” (Lk.2:27).

“The child’s father and mother marveled at what was said about him. Then Simeon blessed them...” (Lk.2:33-34).

“When Joseph and Mary had done everything required by the Law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee to their own village of Nazareth” (Lk.2:39).

When the magi had gone, an Angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said: Get up, take the child and his mother and flee to Egypt and stay there until I tell you, for Herod is about to search for the child to kill him. Then Joseph got up, took the child and

his mother by the night and went to Egypt, where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: 'Out of Egypt I called my son' (Mt.2:13-15).

When Herod died, an Angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said: "Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child's life are dead. Then Joseph got up and took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning in Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. Having been warned in a dream he withdrew to the district of Galilee, and went and lived in a village called Nazareth. So was fulfilled what was said through the prophets: 'He will be called a Nazarene' (Mt. 2:19-23).

Every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the Feast of the Passover. When he was twelve years old, they went up to the Feast, according to the custom. After the Feast was over, while his parents were returning home, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but they were unaware of it. Thinking he was in their company, they traveled on for a day. Then they began looking for him among their relatives and friends. When they did not find him, they went back to Jerusalem to look for him. After three days they found him in the temple courts, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. Everyone who heard him was amazed at his understanding and his answers. When the parents saw him, they were astonished. His mother said to him: 'Son, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you.' And He said to them: 'Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?' But they did not understand what he was saying to them. Then he went down to Nazareth with them and was obedient to them. But his mother kept all these things in her heart (Lk.2:41-51).

"Jesus was the son, so it was thought, of Joseph" (Lk.3:23).

(The reaction of the inhabitants of Nazareth about Jesus) “Is not this the carpenter’s son?” (Mt. 13:55)

His Name and Qualifications

Joseph. Etymologically the name Joseph in Hebrew means the one who brings increase or “will add.” This very name itself signified his vocation. Joseph was called to bring growth in the life of Mary and Jesus. He worked in order to nourish them and support them. In other words, Joseph lived for Mary and Jesus. He was the foster-father of the Son of the God who became Son of man, and the husband of Mary. In its sublime sense, God is the paradigm of Joseph. He made the world and filled it with his goodness (*thob*). God created humans in His own image and likeness (Gen. 1:26-27). He blessed, i.e. filled with His well being every creature. Thus God, the source of *thob* brought life, happiness, and celebration in the world.

The Joseph. God called Abraham to be blessed and to bless others (Gen.12:2-3). He elected Israel as his cherished possession (Ex. 19:5) so that they should become the paradigm of the new humanity. Acts of liberation from Egypt and Babylon, of bringing them to the Promised Land, of providing them judges, kings and prophets, and finally sending his only Begotten Son, (Jn. 3:16), who lived and died to make humans the children of God, are some of the Joseph- deeds of God. As Jesus says, He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous (Mt. 5:45).

Of the house of David. Joseph belonged to the Davidic lineage (Lk.1:26; 2:4; 3:23). King David was the beloved of God, and who had the heart of God (1 Sam.13:14). God was with him (1 Sam.16:18; 17:37; 18:12, 28; 2 Sam. 5:10; 7:3). He was God’s elected one (Ps.88:3, His servant (*ebed*), 2 Sam.7:8; Ps.89:3, 20; Ps.78:70). and His anointed (Ps. 89:38), upon whom the Spirit of God dwelt (1 Sam.16:13). This sweet singer of the divine praises loved God with his whole heart and contributed to making the liturgy vivid and celebratory (Sir.47:8-10). The tradition attributes to David the authorship of Psalms (2 Sam. 6:5; 1 Chr.6:31; 16:7-42). He was a true devotee of God and a lover of humans. God

promised him that his kingdom will stand forever (2 Sam.7:16), which was fulfilled in the person of Jesus Christ (Lk.1:32-33).

One who was engaged to a virgin. Mary was the most favored one, the recipient of divine favor, with whom the Lord dwelt. She was predestined to be the Mother of God. Now Joseph becomes the favored man of God by being elevated to the status of husband of Mary. In Mt.1:19 he is called husband of Mary.

A righteous man (*saddiq*; in Greek *dikaios*). God is the source and fullness of righteousness; he is the most *saddiq*, in whom there is no duality or division or inequality. Perfect harmony, proportion, correlations and equivalence reign in him. He is consistent in himself and unswervingly faithful to His covenant promises. A righteous man keeps the divine law and does God's will. Now Joseph is graced with this biblical quality.

Giver of name. Joseph is granted the grace to name the Son of God, who became Son of man. It is the superior party, like father or king, - representatives of God, the real name-giver, who gives the name.

Father. Mary calls Joseph in Lk. 2:46 'Father'. This title is usually attributed to the one who begets. In Jn. 3:16 Jesus is called the only begotten Son of God, the Father. Every paternity originates from God (Eph. 3:15).

A Silent One

Not even a single word is recorded in the Gospels as uttered by Joseph. This carpenter – a job not respectful and noble - worked silently in his workshop. He loved solitude and prayed in his heart by reciting the Psalms. Although he never dreamt of marriage, some of his friends approached him with a marriage proposal. Since Mary was known as a girl of simplicity, modesty, and piety, he consented to the proposal. It was indeed the plan of God, who had in the mind great designs concerning him.

The Formation Begins

After the engagement, Joseph had to encounter a critical situation. Mary was found to be with child (Mt. 1:18). What to do? The Law of Moses in Dt.22:23-24 insisted that such a person is to be stoned to death. God was indeed placing Joseph, the righteous man in a dilemma. Here begins the divine act of formation. This *saddiq* did not want to disgrace Mary publically (Mt. 1:19). At the same time, his righteousness did not allow him to marry her. Days were spent in mental agony. Finally, he planned to leave her quietly.

Reflection I

The divine Formator did not interfere during Joseph's dark night of the soul and come to him with words of consolation. He left the formee to himself. This is indeed the divine pedagogy of formation. The disciple has to struggle hard, sweating blood, so to say. Once he has come to a decision, which humanly speaking was the best solution, the divine Pedagogue intervenes not directly, but through an angel in a dream. Here a person can argue: Can the dreams be trusted? What is the guarantee that it was the Angel of the Lord?

The Announcement of the Angel, Mt.1:20-21

“Joseph, the son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife. For what has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”

Explanation

“**Son of David**”. The Angel of the Lord addresses Joseph ‘son of David’. This is the only place in the Gospel of Mathew where this designation is applied to someone other than Jesus. The angel puts stress on the Davidic descent of Joseph, implicitly telling him to show himself as worthy of the son of David, who showed total loyalty to the Lord, thus permitting Him to work wonders in him. This reminder may dispose of Joseph to put into practice the divine instruction.

“Do not be afraid”. This formula is a standard re-assurance given by heavenly visitors, e.g., Gen.15:1; Dan.10:12, 19; Lk. 1:30; 2:10; 8:50.

“To take Mary as your wife”. Another possible translation is: “Take Mary your wife home.” Although they were only betrothed couples, the angel calls Mary the wife of Joseph. The verb ‘take ’ means ‘accept’.

“What is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit”. God is here the initiator. Everything is preternatural, strange and odd to human reason.

“You are to give him the name of Jesus”. The naming of a male child takes place formally at the time of circumcision on the eight-day after birth (Lk. 2:21). Joseph, a human being, is given the privilege of giving the name to the Son of God.

Reflection II

Faith plays a vital role in religious and priestly formation. The fact that one is called is based on faith. It cannot be demonstrated. “Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Heb. 11:1). In the formative process the candidates should be trained to grow in faith and to look at all things with the eyes of faith. Of course reason has a dominant place in formation, but the disciples should be formed to understand the limits of reason, and to blindly commit themselves to the unconventional and unnatural ways of the divine Formator. Joseph was not a mentally retarded person. It was not easy to reject the promptings of reason and to reconcile him to the dictate of the angel, announced in a dream. It would have caused him inexpressible suffering. The priestly/religious call is supernaturally dimensioned, which could amount to foolishness to the eyes of the worldly people (1 Cor.1:18-23).

Response I, Mt. 1:24-25

“When Joseph woke up, he did what the Angel of the Lord had commanded him, and took Mary as his wife.” Nothing is recorded about hesitation, diffidence, indecision, and reluctance of the formee. The text implies Joseph’s blind trust that was heroic.

Reflection III

Formees are humans, who are gifted with intelligence and reasoning power. Hence there is nothing wrong to ponder on the pros and cons of the issue, and finally to submit to the will of the Formator, by renouncing the human inclinations. But Joseph seems to have attained divine maturity that made him the son of Abraham who immediately uttered *hinneni* to God's seemingly unreasonable demand (Gen.22:1). As soon as Joseph woke up he put into practice the instruction given by the Angel of the Lord.

The Formation Continues

Preparations

We can surmise that Joseph treated Mary with great respect and reverence. About himself, he considered an unworthy person whom God has elevated to the dignity of the foster father of the Son of God. With the eager expectation to see Immanuel with his eyes, Joseph intensified life of prayer and asceticism. At the same time, he began to make exterior arrangements to welcome the baby.

A Worrisome Order, Lk. 2:1-3

Then he heard an shocking and distressful news. Cesar Augustus has issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world and that everyone has to get enrolled in his village or town (Lk. 2:1-3). Joseph, who was of the Davidic lineage had to go to Bethlehem of Judea. He has to journey 130 miles through difficult roads. Now Mary was expecting a child. What to do? Indeed, the hand of the divine Formator was in this. He wanted to make his formee attain a higher degree of perfection through treading on the path of suffering. Joseph was fully aware of the distressful journey and the great suffering that Mary had to undergo. He had recourse to prayer that brought upon him this conviction: It is the will of God to obey human authorities. Although he was poor he bought an ass so that Mary could mount on it, which will make her journey less painful. With necessary provisions, he set off.

Reflection IV

A formee may encounter such difficult situations. This is the chance and grace to look at things with the eyes of faith. Nothing will happen without the knowledge of God. It is his will that the disciple must say *amen*, and undertake suffering. Only then he/she will attain divine maturity, and become like Christ who “offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to his Father... And learned obedience from what he suffered” (Heb. 5:7-8). A priestly/religious call is an invitation to reject worldly views, Ideas, and ideals thought patterns and lifestyle. They have to willingly follow the narrow road (Mt. 7:13), and take up the cross, and tread on Christ’s footsteps that lead to the Mount Calvary.

A Further Cross, Mt. 2:7b

Somehow Joseph and Mary could reach Bethlehem. During the journey she was writhing and wriggling, that pained Joseph’s heart. He did to the utmost what a human being could do to provide her more ease and repose. At Bethlehem, Joseph knocked at the doors of relatives, friends and the inhabitants for shelter. But nobody welcomed them. Finally, in tears, the formee with his wife entered the cattle shed. There Mary gave birth to the Son of God. She wrapped the child in cloth bands and laid him in a manger, i.e. in a feeding trough for the animals.

Reflection V

Joseph, a human being, might have pestered with the thought: How the people could close their hearts to the Son of God who is coming to them to be born as the son of man? How they could harden their hearts in such a way? How these creatures become so ungrateful, inconsiderate and egotistic? Why God is not punishing them? How can He connive at such iniquitous and abominable attitude? The faith of many called ones may grow cold and may be tempted to lead a sluggish and languid life. But Joseph was an ideal disciple, who said ‘amen’ to this will of the Master, thus becoming the son of Abraham (Gen. 22:1), the father of the salvation history.

Joyful Experiences

The art of the divine Pedagogue consists of simply not leading the formee through the path of the cross, but also providing exhilaration and bliss.

A Blissful Atmosphere, Lk. 2:16-18

The glory of the Lord shone around (Lk. 2:9) the cattle shed. As Joseph was kneeling and adoring the divine Babe, he heard the sound of the hurried steps. There came in shepherds in their shabby dress. All of them fell down and worshipped the infant. The hearts of these simple and humble people were brimming with joy and inner peace (Lk. 2:14). A heavenly atmosphere reigned there. Joseph and Mary also participated in that celestial rapture.

Naming the Baby, Lk. 2:21

“On the eight-day, when it was time to circumcise the baby, he was named Jesus, the name the angel had given him before he had been conceived” (Lk. 2:21). According to Mt. 1:21 Joseph has to name the son, Jesus, while the angel in Lk. 1:31 asks Mary to give the child the name Jesus. The text of Lk. 2:21 does not explicitly mention the one who named the child since the emphasis was put on the name Jesus. Usually it was privilege of the father to name the baby. The humble Joseph with all reverence and devotion would have done that act. It might have provided the formee *atma sakshatkara* (self-realization). The loving and tender Pedagogue grants the formee this ineffable grace.

Presentation in the Temple, Lk. 2:22-39

According to the Law of Moses Joseph and Mary took the child to the Jerusalem temple in order to present him to the Lord, and to offer the prescribed sacrifice. There occurred an unexpected scene. An upright and devout man named Simeon came to the temple, and took the child in his arms and uttered a blessing prayer (Lk. 2:29-31). He said: “Now Lord, dismiss your servant in peace, for my eyes have seen your salvation, made ready by you in the sight of all peoples, a light to give revelation to the Gentiles and glory to your people Israel.” Joseph was surprised at what was being said about the child. With a joyful heart, the

formee praised the Lord – a trait of the called ones. Simeon also blessed Joseph and Mary, i.e. uttered words of well-being. Also the prophetess Anna came up and praised God; she spoke about the child to all who were waiting for the deliverance of Jerusalem. This also increased the astonishment of Joseph. What a wonderful experience! The divine Pedagogue was blessing the formee with the grace of interior joy that will make him more committed and perfect.

The Magi at the Cattle Shed, Mt. 2:1-12

The magi from the East saw a wonderful star of the birth of the king of the Jews. They started to Jerusalem in order to render worship to Him (Mt. 2:1-2). At the news king Herod was troubled. After tracing the locality of the birth, namely Bethlehem of Judea (Mt. 2:3-6), the cunning king asked the magi to go to Bethlehem, find the newborn baby, and come back to him, “so that I too may come and worship him” (Mt. 2:7-8). As the magi departed, the star that they have seen guided them to the manger (Mt. 2:9-10). They entered and saw the infant with Mary, and fell down, worshipped him and offered to him gifts, gold and frankincense, and myrrh, (Mt. 2:11).

The coming of magi and rendering the homage to Jesus increased the amazement of Joseph. Jesus is venerated as a royal person! He is the foster-father of the king of Jews! The eyes of Joseph were filled with tears of joy and gratitude. In his heart, he uttered: “Lord, I am totally unworthy to this sublime position!” To be the husband of the Mother of God and to be the legal father of the King of kings! With wordless words, the formee expressed the sentiments of joyful gratitude and praise.

Days of Suffering

Another Dream, Mt. 2:13

As soon as the magi departed, an Angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream, saying: “Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt and stay there until I tell you. For Herod is about to look for the child in order to destroy him” (Mt. 2:13).

The Israelites boasted that they were the chosen people of God. They hated the Egyptians since their ancestors were oppressed by these foreigners and made them slaves in Egypt. To be out of the Promised Land was considered a disgrace and curse. Now Joseph was asked to flee with the child and Mary to Egypt.

Reflection VI

Immediately after providing bliss, the Formator puts the formee in a predicament. Joseph has to flee to a pagan country through the desert. Life became uncertain. It was like a leap into the dark. What will happen at the next moment? Will they fall into the hands of the soldiers of Herod? How can the baby survive the heat of the day and the cold of the night? Will the bandits attack them? Where they will get the food and drink? Why God puts him to this test? Why God allowed hundreds of innocent babies being slaughtered by Herod? Does the Almighty see these evils? Why did not he prevent this wanton behavior of the hellish power? Joseph, a human being might have been tormented with such thought.

Positive Response, Mt. 2:14-15

“And Joseph got up and took the child and his mother by night and fled to Egypt. And he was there until the death of Herod...”

Although thoughts proper to humans arose in the mind of Joseph, he did not succumb to them. The formee knew that this was the chance to prove his faith in the Formator. As a called one he totally rejected the earthly brooding and blindly said ‘amen’ to the word of the Angel of the Lord. It is said that Joseph got up, and taking the child and mother by night, fled. There was no hesitation and no arguing about the pros and cons of the flight. One may say, Joseph once again “learned obedience from what he suffered” (Heb.5:8).

A Sojourner

Days in Egypt were filled with life problems. It was not easy to find a home and work for earning bread. Often anguish gripped him at the sufferings of the young mother and the baby. The Egyptians were not

kind to these Jews. Although it was not easy, Joseph tried to find the hand of God in all these happenings.

A Third Dream and Response, Mt.2:19-21

As Joseph has adjusted to the situation, “the Angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to him saying: “Get up, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel. For they who were seeking the life of child have died” (Mt.2:19-20). Although the called one was glad to return to his country, he would have fed up at the thought of making the tedious journey through the desert with all the possible difficulties and dangers. Still, he did not question the angel’s instruction; he did not complain or murmur at the plight. The formee’s was a wordless action. “He got up, took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel” (Mt.2: 21). Promptness should be the trait of a disciple. A slothful one will not attain perfection. His/her formation will remain incomplete and deficient.

Another Predicament, Mt. 2:22a

“But when Joseph heard that Archelaus was reigning over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there” (Mt. 2:22a)

The formee’s fear of Archelaus was well-grounded, as this son of Herod tended to follow the wicked ways of his father. Joseph was not worrying about himself. His only concern was the safety of Jesus and Mary, for which he was ready to undergo any kind of sacrifice. Blessed the disciple whose only solicitude is the well being of Jesus and Mary! Blessed is the formee who spares no pains to make Jesus and Mary happy!

A Fourth Dream and Response, Mt. 2:22b-23

“Having been warned in a dream Joseph withdrew to the district of Galilee and he went and lived in a village called Nazareth” (Mt. 2:22b-23).

It was said in Mt. 2:12 that the magi had been warned in a dream not to return to Herod. Now Joseph is warned in a dream. Through a dream the formee’s fear was taken away. There was no need for him to get settled in Judea so that Archelaus could not do any harm to the child

Jesus. It is said that Joseph was warned (*hrēmatisstheis*). The warning is given through a dream. A strong premonition is given to him, which suggests that he should never take the opposite decision. It is the divine Pedagogue who takes the full initiative. Of course, He was not afraid that Joseph will not take heed of His instruction.

A Celestial Experience, Lk.2:40

“As the child grew up he became strong; he was filled with wisdom, and God’s favor was upon him” (Lk.2:40).

Joseph’s name is not mentioned in this text; hence the following comment is a conjecture. The divine Pedagogue graced the called one to see with his own eyes this sight of growth of the Son of God. He could hear and see the wise words and deeds of the child. Joseph could achieve God-realization (*Iswara sakshatkara*) and self-realization (*atma sakshatkara*). Through this, the formee was day by day growing to the heights of humility and faith. To see and hear the face and voice of Jesus, so to say, intoxicated the carpenter. The summit of perfection was within his reach.

Consummation of Formation

Participation in the Passion of Christ

The divine Master brought into the life of Joseph inexpressible and intense suffering. The boy Jesus was found missing at the return journey from Jerusalem. Thinking that he was in the traveling party, Joseph and Mary journeyed along for a whole day. Only then they came to know of the boy’s absence. It gave Joseph a fright. In the divine providence he was entrusted to look after Immanuel. Has this happened because of his carelessness? It bore heavily on him. Tearfully Joseph together with his wife spent three days in a diligent search for the boy. This can be compared to the formee’s dark night of the soul. They did not eat or drink or sleep during those days. Indeed, it was the divine Formator who brought up this agony, in order to purify the remaining worldly attachments and blemishes in the soul of the formee. Will the human formators dare to follow the example of the divine Master?

A Blissful Encounter, Lk.2:46-50

On the third day, it happened that they found him in the Temple, sitting in the middle of the teachers of the Law and posing questions to them. All who heard him were struck by his comprehension and the intelligent answers. At the sight of Jesus Joseph breathed a sigh of relief. Although Mary burst out, the foster father did not open his mouth to speak a word of protest. Inwardly he uttered a prayer of thanks and praised the Almighty for the grace of the presence of the Son of God. Of course Joseph did not understand the meaning of the words of Jesus' reply. He did not bother about it. I have found the Lord, that is enough for me. Jesus returned with the parents to Nazareth and was obedient to them (Lk. 2:51a). How can the Creator and the source of wisdom become obedient to a mere poor and ignorant carpenter? This filled the foster father with amazement, and he spent the remaining days of his life pondering this mystery.