

# **Role of Families in Promoting and Maintaining Vocations**

**Antony Chundelikkat**

John Paul II Institute for Studies on Marriage and Family,  
Changanassery, Kerala

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## *Abstract*

Promoting vocations must penetrate the entire life of the Church at all levels. A climate of fear, suspicion and discouragement is not a favorable environment for the germination, sprouting, growth, flowering and fruition of vocations to the priesthood or consecrated life. Traditionally, Catholic homes were the privileged ground where seeds of vocation were sown, nourished and nurtured. The family is the primary place for the humanization of a person and society where an individual can grow physically and spirituality in a healthy fashion. It is within the loving atmosphere of the family that the call to a radical following of Jesus is frequently heard. Researches show that when the social, spiritual and moral life of family improve, vocations to priestly and religious life too increase.

## **Introduction**

Cardinal PioLaghi, prefect of the Congregation for Catholic Education and president of the Vatican committee coordinating vocations promotion has said, "Promoting vocations must penetrate the entire life of the Church at all levels. It is one of the most urgent tasks facing the Church today. An authentic culture of vocations should be promoted which is motivated not by the fear of extinction, but by the certainty of God's gift present in every person." Worldwide, the number of priests and religious has dwindled during the past two

decades.<sup>1</sup> What is a viable solution to the decline in the number of vocations that we experience and how can we maintain religious vocations? What is the role of the family in promoting and maintaining vocations? These are the questions we try to deal within this article through exploring the role of families in promoting and maintaining vocations. We shall look at the theological foundation of the family and religious life, their role in the promotion of vocations, and the important role the family environment plays in maintaining the vocation. This article also proposes some strategies and guidelines for promoting and maintaining vocations.

### **Need for a 'Vocation Culture'**

Pope John Paul II in his Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris Consortio* stated that, "the humanity passes by the way of the family" (FC 86). Without the revitalization of the family the promotion and maintenance of vocations is impossible. The way to start promoting religious vocations is to begin with emphasizing the vocation of marriage and family. Vocations to the priesthood and religious life emerge from vocations of life-giving, lifelong and faithful marriages. A climate of fear, suspicion and discouragement is not a favorable environment for the germination, sprouting, growth, flowering and fruition of vocations to the priesthood or consecrated life. Many are scared to publicly pronounce their desire to be a priest or a religious sister, because they are afraid of the scorn they may have to face from their friends and relatives. Traditionally, Catholic homes were the privileged ground where seeds of vocation were sown, nourished and nurtured by the parents who understood the importance of priesthood and religious life in the wellbeing of the church as a community. One can see that the theological foundation of both family life and religious life are one and the same.

### **Foundation of Religious Life and Family Life**

Pope John Paul II, interprets the 'narration of the creation of man' (Gen 1:27) as a divine vocation. Pope John Paul II called the first two

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1. India led the world in the number of vocations to women's Religious life in the Catholic Church, according to an analysis published in the Catholic Culture website. Asia and Africa made considerable gains in the number of female Religious, while Europe, Americas and Oceania showed a downward trend. For, indeed, in contrast to other continents suffering a general decline in vocations, Asia together with Africa represents a fertile seedbed of vocations. In 26 years, from 1978 to 2004, candidates to the priesthood in Asia rose in number by 153.28% from 11,536 to 29, 2202.

chapters of the Book of Genesis as “the beatifying beginning of human existence in the world” (John Paul II, 1999). The Pope considered it as the ‘first human experience’ of their divine vocation. The creation itself is God’s gift to the world. Giving a gift implies a deep love and intimacy between the one who receives and the one who gives the gift. Both the mystery of marital life and the religious life are revelations of this mystery being a gift and becoming a gift to God.

The human being is created to become “one flesh” (Gen 2:24). This is the first invitation that God has given to humanity. This means that the call to union is basic to all human beings. The expression “they become one flesh,” is a summing-up of man’s purpose. The intention of creating man was to develop the experience of unity between body and soul. Becoming “one flesh” (Gen 2:24) refers to a total union of body and mind. This includes psychosomatic integration. As Christ gave Himself to the Church and the Church gave herself to Christ, the person is called to become one flesh. This is the great mystery of offering and commitment. Becoming a gift is first and foremost a spiritual reality though it has its corporeal implications too. Giving and receiving the gift is an internal reality that permeates the whole character of the person.

The mystery of becoming ‘one flesh’ in marital as well as religious vocation is elevated to a new level and dimension in the mystery of the unity between Christ and the Church. Just as Christ loved and sacrificed Himself for the Church, the union of husband and wife symbolizes the very nature of Christ-Church relationship. Becoming one flesh means human beings are created to become the eternal bride of Christ. The real Christian life is a call to this ultimate unity.

### **Christian Family in the Promotion of Vocation**

The Christian family has to fulfill its mission in this world. In the realization of the Kingdom of God in this world, those who live a family life and those who live the religious life are not mutually disposable but integral and complimentary parts of the whole process. The Christian families are both objects and subjects of evangelization. As a subject of evangelization the family is called to fulfill its mission in this world. Four general tasks which Pope John Paul II emphasized in *Familiaris Consortio* for the family are the following:

- a) A family is called to form the communion (*communis*) of persons.

John Paul II considers the family to be a community of persons whose proper way of existing and living together is in communion: *Communio personarum* (John Paul II, 1999).

- b) Families are called to serve the life because life and love are always linked, as they are in God.
- c) Families should participate in the development of the society - social obligation and commitment.
- d) Families should have a role in the life and mission of the Universal Church (FC 17). Families have an important role in building up the Church in this world. Christian families as the 'domestic Church' (LG 11) and are called to make up a natural and basic school for the formation in the faith.

The formation of the conscience and the Christian faith has its beginning in the family. Only the families that uphold moral values are likely to develop into fertile grounds that nurture vocations. The families that give excessive importance to material welfare and discard religious values usually obstruct the way of their children from choosing a life devoted to God and His Kingdom. Pope Pius XI, in his encyclical *Ad Catholici Sacerdotii* (To the Summit of Catholic Priesthood - Dec.20, 1935), mentions that the first garden which will spontaneously germinate and blossom into the flowers of the sanctuary, is always the truly Christian family. The Catechism of the Catholic Church says the family is the community in which, from childhood onwards, one can learn moral values, begin to honor God and make good use of freedom. Family life is an initiation into life in the society (CCC 2207).

The family is the primary spiritual community for the human being. The family provides the important atmosphere for the growth of the persons. Human beings need to be loved, trusted, consoled, and esteemed. These needs are initially met in the family environment. It is in the family that each person realizes him/herself as the creature that God willed for Himself, since in the family, the sincere donation of oneself is possible (John Paul II, 1999). The Christian family - in all its myriad forms - is the *domestic church* (FC 21; LG 11; CCC 2204). Family is the school of human virtues and of Christian charity" (CCC 1666). Family is the place where the offering of one's life takes place without any condition or reservation (CCC 1657). John Paul II considers family very important for a person since it is the only place "in which each human being is revealed in his/her uniqueness and as unrepeatability" (John Paul II 1995). In fact, "within the family each

member is accepted, respected and honored precisely because he or she is a person; and if any family member is in greater need, the care which he or she receives is all the more intense and attentive" (Peschke, 1994). The family is the primordial community. As the fount of new life, it is the natural, if not the only place where the human person can grow physically and spirituality in a healthy fashion.

### **Family is the Vital Cell of Society and a Place of Socialization**

Speaking on the role of families, the Second Vatican Council document on the Apostolate of the Laity remarks, "The mission of being the primary vital cell of society has been given to the family by God himself. The family as the foundation of every human society, and in continuation with tradition stands as the first and vital cell of society" (AA 11, F.C. 42). It is the original, primordial form of our human society. The pattern of behavior, the outlook and nature of the person reflects the lifestyle and values they have experienced at home. It was the plan of God that the family would be the cradle and cornerstone of human society. It is a kind of school for deeper humanity (May, 1981). John Paul II advocated a genuine and mature communion of persons within the family to transform it into the irreplaceable fabric of society (FC 43).

The family is the primary place for the humanization of a person and society. It is also the cradle of life and love. It is the first and fundamental structure of what John Paul II refers to as "human ecology" in which the human being receives their first formative ideas about truth and goodness, learns what it means to love and to be loved, and thus what it actually means to be a person (John Paul II, 1991). It constitutes a community of love and solidarity, which is uniquely suited to teach and transmit cultural, ethical, spiritual and religious values essential for the development and well-being of its own members and of society.

### **Family as a Primary, Original and Irreplaceable Educator**

The educational role of parents is peculiar to human beings since education as a creative activity, is only possible for persons. Since the educational role of parents is connected with parenthood, which is considered as co-creation with God, this means that God too is involved in the educational work of parents. Parents hold a privileged role and responsibility in family life (CCC 2221-2230). Each parent is obliged to live the baptismal vocation as priest, prophet and servant-ruler in the home, in the workplace and in the marketplace. Parents are the most significant role models in all aspects of their children's life, including religious formation. At baptism, parents commit to

sharing their faith with their child. Parents are the primary educators in faith (CCC 2223).

Parental love is the most basic element to qualify them in their educational role as parents. Freud and other psychologists have proved that a child exhibits the same character and mental tendencies in adulthood which he acquires in the family (Sharma, 1971). Pope John Paul II in *Familiaris Consortio* (FC 39) reminds parents of their grave responsibility for transmitting the faith experience to their children. The moral and the religious life of a person and his capacity to love are first awakened by parental love. Parents assist their children by praying with them and by teaching them to seek God's will in their lives through vocational discernment. Parents need to have a personal sense of vocation and mission about themselves in order to pass this on to their children. Parents must be willing to offer their children as divine gifts back to God for the service of His people. Parents need to understand that the true happiness their children depends on their generous response to God's call and that God is never outdone in generosity and love.

Parents should encourage their children to discern their intended vocation, and whatever their vocation, they should foster it with special care (CCC 1656). It is in such a situation the parents, siblings, and all other members of the family exercise the *priesthood of the baptized* in a practical way. Bearing witness through a holy life, regular reception of sacraments, family prayer, charitable activities and so on can enable a person to discover their vocation. Families in which the parents have a warm and loving relationship provide a better base for the transmission of basic values and orientation to the children. Parents are the primary helpers for young people in finding their personal vocation.

### **Christian Family: Source and Seedbed of Vocation**

The family is the nurturing ground of vocations. The seminary as well as the religious formation will be effective only if the seed of the vocation is planted within the families. Children acquire their values from their parent's conduct. If the parents live their Christian faith, giving due respect and showing reverence towards priests and religious, the children may be attracted to a religious vocation. Only families where there is a spirit of prayer and love among parents can nurture vocations to priestly and religious life. Life witnessing of the parents is vital in nurturing religious vocations. Many priests and sisters consider the influence of their families, especially their parents, the decisive factor in following their vocations.

Pope Paul VI considered the fostering vocations as the duty of the whole Christian community, though the principal contributors are the families. The preamble to the final statement of the National Convention of Vocation Promoters (1982) stressed that the Christian families have to be renewed as the nursing ground for Christian faith and practice. It is within the loving atmosphere of the family that the call to a radical following of Jesus is frequently heard. It is there that the mystery of vocation, of God calling individuals for consecration and mission, is born, fostered, encouraged and nourished. Values and motivation imbued by the family take deep roots during the course of formation, giving rise to one's Christian identity and sense of mission. The family is the domestic Kingdom-of-God. The quality of family life and the relationships within the family either nourishes and fosters vocations, or weakens and destroys them.

### **Family Environment for Maintaining the Vocation**

We have already seen that the past experiences of a person will have a decisive effect on their present orientation in life. Thus when a young person enters the seminary or a house of formation, besides their academic credentials, they bring a lot more in. The candidate brings the 'culture' in which he/she was born and raised. This 'culture' is a relatively stable set of values, attitudes and action patterns which took shape within the unique social climate of their membership groups, primarily the family. The foundation of the human person and the course each takes in the future, are determined by the care they receive in the very first years of life. The early childhood years contribute to whether a person is later cheerful or depressed. The emotions of a consecrated person and the crisis they may undergo, may relate to a reason hidden in the past. The quality of interpersonal relationship between the parents, their maturity and depth of intimacy, all play a significant role in the healthy development of the children (Morissette, 1989). The family plays an important role in the developing personality of an individual (Manalel, 1984). Researches carried out by psychologists dealing with vocations clearly indicate the influence of the family in the career development of the children. In 1977 Anne Roe, a pioneer in vocational psychology, constructed a new classification of people based on their vocation. According to her classification, people in the service sector primarily come from a home which is characterized by a loving and secure environment.

Pope John Paul II in his *Letter to Families* (no. 16) says that a mother not only shapes the child's body but also its personality during the pregnancy. Therefore it would be logical to say that the inclination

towards a religious vocation may begin even before birth. The importance of family background, developmental progress of the candidate, environmental factors both at home and in the neighborhood, the influence of religious and religious activities, participation in different socio-cultural associations and pre-seminary socialization are to be seriously considered in the selection and training of the future priests and religious (Oscar, 1967). Sociology and psychology give us ample evidence to suggest that the behavior of an adult is shaped by factors that were at work in his early childhood experiences (Greenly, 1972).

### **The Impact of the Family on the Thoughts and Behavior of a Person**

The family lays the foundation for all the interpersonal relationships of the growing person. Any disruptive incident within the family of a religious person will automatically affect their thoughts and behavior as well. It is generally recognized that lifelong patterns of behavior, values, goals and attitudes are strongly associated with the characteristics of the parents especially as these are expressed in childrearing and family lifestyles (Mills & Brent, 1906). Although later experiences outside the home and in the community where the person lives also have significant influence on their development, they often use them to validate and compare to the lessons they learned in their home. Family therapists are generally of the view that psychological problems originate and are maintained by the circular recursive events in the family (Nichols & Schwartz, 2007). They believe that troubles in a person's life, are due to the pathogenic introjects (internalized childhood memories) they received from the past relationships with members of their original families.

Sigmund Freud has spoken at length about the impact of family relationships on the character formation of an individual. According to Freud, parents have a great and intimate role to play in the formation of an individual's personality and in his/her social life. Most psychologists agree on this and say that there is in each one of us an unconscious part influencing the way we think and act. Bowen considers the family as an emotional unit, its members being intensely and emotionally interconnected (Bowen, 1978). According to him, family members so profoundly affect each other's thoughts, feelings and actions that it often seems as if people are living under the same "emotional skin." People solicit each other's attention, approval, and support and react to each other's needs, expectations, and distress. A change in one person's functioning is predictably followed by reciprocal changes in the functioning of others. According to Bowen

the level of the differentiation of self of an individual depends on the level of influence the family exerts on them. The less developed a person's "self" the more impact others have on one's functioning and the more one would try to control, actively or passively, the functioning of others. The basic building blocks of a "self" are inborn, but an individual's family relationships during childhood and adolescence primarily determine how much "self" one develops. Once established, the level of "self" rarely changes unless a person makes a structured and long-term effort to change it (Bowen, 1978).

People leading the religious life with "low differentiation" or a poorly differentiated "self" tend to heavily depend on the acceptance and approval of others. They will readily make adjustments in the way they think, say or act to please others or they categorically affirm themselves and force others to conform to their point of view. Individuals with a low differentiated "self" can become a coward or a bully/rebel. The ability of an individual to distinguish between their intellectual and emotional processes depend on their "self". A religious person with a 'well-differentiated self' is able to realistically recognize their need and a degree of dependence on others. They will be able to manage criticism, conflict or even rejection with a balanced mind, and will stay calm during and after such experiences. Furthermore, such a person is able to maintain a clear and well defined boundary between their thinking processes and their emotional responses. Being a principled person, they are able to make prudent decisions regarding personal, familial or social affairs, and act selflessly. A person with well-differentiated self is capable of working in and with groups, without being bullied (Bowen, 1966).

Parents may unwittingly transmit their emotional problems to their children. Children inherit many types of problems (as well as strengths) from their relationships with their parents. The problems they inherit that most affect their lives are relationship sensitivities such as heightened needs for attention and approval, difficulty dealing with expectations, the tendency to blame themselves or others, feeling responsible for the happiness of others, or holding others responsible for their own happiness, and acting impulsively to relieve the anxiety of the moment, rather than tolerating anxiety and acting thoughtfully. Such situations are common within the life of consecrated persons as well. Emotional deprivation can have a negative influence on a person's life. An individual who is distanced from the families of origin may try to stabilize their relationship-needs by creating substitute

“families” in social work settings. This can affect the person both positively and negatively.

**Role of Families in Promoting and Maintaining Vocation**

A recent study that was conducted to find out the factors that nurture vocations and the significant role that families played to foster vocations, reveals a positive relationship between the faith and spiritual life of parents and vocation. It also affirms that the behavioral patterns of priests and religious are influenced by their family background and social background. The nurturing conditions in the family have a great influence on the vocations. These conditions can assist God’s gift to grow or stifle it. Inter-personal relationships in the families of the religious have a remarkable influence on them.

**Table: 1. Age and Sex distribution of Respondents**

Age of Formees	Male	%	Female	%	Total	%
17-20 Yrs.	30	27.3	22	23.85	52	26
20-24 Yrs.	62	56.4	50	55.6	112	56
25 and above	18	16.3	18	20.55	36	18
Total	110	100	90	100	200	100

56% of candidates were between the age of 20 and 24 years. 26% were between 17 and 20 and 18% belonged to the age group of 25 and above.

**Table: 2. Respondents by size of Family**

Number of children in the Family of the Candidate	Male	%	Female	%	Total	%
1 or 2	17	15.5	2	2.2	19	9.5
3 or 4	46	41.8	43	47.8	89	44.5
5 or more	47	42.7	45	50	92	46

Table 3 shows that 48% of fathers of candidates belong to an agricultural background.

**Table: 4. Respondents by Mothers' Occupation**

Occupation of Mothers	Male	%	Female	%	Total	%
House wife	102	92.7	85	94.4	187	93.5
Govt. Service	5	4.5	5	5.6	10	5
Others	3	3.8	-	-	3	1.5
Total	110	100	90	100	200	100

Table 4 shows 93.5% of mothers of candidates coming from rural areas are housewives taking care of their children and the home.

**Table: 5. Education of Respondents**

Qualification	Male	%	Female	%	Total	%
S.S.L.C.	-	-	3	3.3	3	1.5
Pre-degree / Plus Two	75	68.2	70	77.8	145	72.5
Graduation / Post Graduation	35	31.8	17	18.9	52	26
Total	110	100	90	100	200	100

Table 5 points out that the majority of Candidates, 72.5% have completed their pre-degree course or plus two exam.

**Table: 6. Economic status of the Family**

Income (per annum)	Male	%	Female	%	Total	%
Below Rs 20.000	39	34.5	30	33.3	69	34.5
Rs 20.000 - 30.000	28	25.5	31	34.4	59	29.5
Rs 40.000 - 50.000	24	21.8	17	19	41	20.5
Rs 60.000 - 80.000	10	10	9	10	19	9.5
Rs 80.000 & above	9	8.2	3	3.3	12	6
Total	110	100	90	100	200	100

The lower and average income groups have better faith formation and spiritual life in families.

**Table: 7. Spiritual Life of the Family**

Spiritual Life	Male	%	Female	%	Total	%
Very high	70	63.6	77	85.6	147	73.5
High	33	30	11	12.2	44	22
Moderate	7	6.4	2	2.2	9	4.5
Total	110	100	90	100	200	100

Table 7 gives a picture of the spiritual life of the parents. 73.5% of the parents live a deep spiritual life and it has a significant role in fostering vocations. Frequent church attendance - 94 %, Daily family prayer - 69%, Reading of the Word of God daily - 75%, Regular Reception of the Sacraments - 82%

**Table No. 8 Interpersonal Relationship in the Family**

Interpersonal Relationship	Male	%	Female	%	Total	%
Very high	94	85.5	87	96.7	181	90.5
High	14	12.7	3	3.3	17	8.5
Moderate	2	1.8	—	—	2	1
Total	110	100	90	100	200	100

90.5% of the candidates are from families where there is a very high interpersonal relationship among the family members. It is a factor that influences the child's vocational development.

**Table: 9. Family Witness**

Factors involved in choosing vocations	Male	%	Female	%	Total	%
Family	73	66.4	55	61.1	128	64
Others (Priests, Religious & Teachers)	37	33.6	35	38.9	72	36
Total	110	100	90	100	200	100

64% of the candidates were influenced by the family in choosing their vocation.

## **Major findings and Suggestions**

Almost all the candidates for the priesthood and religious life were from strong, well established Christian families with a good religious background and at least a minimum of education a Pre-Degree or a Plus Two (Table 2) and were from families with five or more children. In large families there is better interaction and sharing among members which gives a strong foundation for the growth of the emotional maturity of the person. 48.5 percent of the fathers of the formees were agriculturists and 93.5 percent of mothers were from rural areas and are housewives.

Families with a lower and average income have better faith formation and spiritual life, and many vocations arise from such families. 73.5 percent of respondents come from where the spiritual life of the parents is very high. Zanzucchi (1996) states that a child perceives the value of sacraments by following the example of its parents. Interpersonal relationships in the families of the formees were remarkably good. 90.5 percent of the candidates are from families where there is a very high level of interpersonal relationship. These homes have tremendous influence on the child's development and on the nurturing of vocations. The majority of the candidates are influenced by the life example of their family members. The religious atmosphere in the family has a tremendous influence on the life and conduct of a person. Hence, the family is the most important agent in promoting vocations. Vocation promotion needs to start from childhood onwards, and even the pregnancy period influences the psycho-spiritual maturation of an individual. Renewal of family life and the deepening of spiritual life are essential. Improved relationships within the family and with others are essential factors to have good priestly and religious vocations. As social and moral life of family improves, vocations to priestly and religious life may also increase. Parents should give strong faith formation to their children, especially by their life witness and encourage their children to listen to the call of God.

## **Conclusion**

In order to foster vocations to priestly and religious life the parents should instill a routine of family prayer as a time for communicating with a loving God so that the children experience an attitude of openness towards God. Parents should be role models of the Christian life so that their children may learn from their example and take the Gospel seriously and value vocations to the consecrated life. Parents should encourage their children to become involved in parish projects,

organizations, and in charitable activities. Family members showing reverence and speaking well of priests and religious, especially when differences of opinion arise, are essential to encouraging vocations. Families adopting and supporting missionaries can provide an incentive for children to opt for similar life in future. Most religious congregations have members working in the missions. Families should be motivated to adopt a missionary. At the parish level, during holy mass, on special occasions, it is advisable to invite missionaries and the religious to speak about their vocation. Forming Altar Server Society is a very effective means of encouraging vocations to the priesthood and religious life. Conducting interviews with priests, sisters, brothers, seminarians and lay missionaries and publishing them in school magazines and parish bulletins can inspire the reader, especially sharing how they discerned their 'call.' Promoting the lives of the saints in various ways, for example, through bulletins, bulletin boards, posters, bibliographies, sale-tables for holy cards with depictions and prayers to the saints are all effective means to foster vocations. Encouraging parishioners, parochial schools and religious education classes to send greeting cards and letters to missionaries to show their support and prayer is also useful in this regard.

Pope Benedict XVI says that every Christian community, every member of the Church, should feel the responsibility for promoting vocations. (48<sup>th</sup> World Day of Prayer for Vocations - May 15, 2011). There is a need for a radical rethinking of how to promote vocations to the priesthood and religious life. In fact, the best way to attract new candidates for pastoral ministry is by helping each member of the Church to discern their specific vocation. At one time the promotion of vocations referred only or mainly to vocations to the priesthood and religious life. Nowadays, all vocations should be promoted, because in the Lord's Church, we all need each other in order to grow. A new evangelization is needed on the eve of the third millennium to recreate a culture favorable to different vocations and to guide young people towards making the right decisions for their future.

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