

Last but not the Least: St Joseph as Formator and Just Man

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Since Jesus had his formation under Blessed Virgin Mary, his beloved mother, and St Joseph, his sponsor father, we can reasonably consider both of them as formators appointed by God the Father. In this article, we shall focus on St Joseph as the formator of the religious and priests.

Joseph had to undergo the bitter agonizing trial of suspicion about and against his would fiancée Mary. “Before they lived together,” “she was found to be with child” (Mt 1:18). We can reasonably guess that what the evangelist Matthew remarks and adds at the end “from the Holy Spirit” (Mt 1:18) was definitely not then the perspective of Joseph; otherwise, he would not have been in a crisis. We also do not find God informing him beforehand what would take place concerning this delicate matter. By doing so, God could have very well avoided a crisis in the life of Joseph as well as of Mary. But this was not the case; he let it happen. God’s pedagogy is immensely wise. He let Joseph pass through a crisis of vocation. On the one hand he could not accept Mary as his spouse any more in such a queer and unfortunate circumstance. On the other hand he was unwilling to expose her to public disgrace and let her be stoned to death according to the Mosaic Law, according to which even “a virgin already engaged to be married” deserves to be punished by stoning for getting pregnant by another man (Dt 22:23-24). Joseph resolved to come out of the dilemma by deciding to dismiss her quietly. One thing that is extraordinary about him in this regard is that he did not want to disgrace her publicly, although he could have very well applied the law against her. His sense of justice did not urge

him to use the law against Mary, even though the whole issue revolved to wound his honour and seemed to speak against her loyalty to him. He was concerned more about her reputation than his own right and honour. This selfless or altruistic attitude of pure love is what makes him just. Jesus might have received this human formation from him. The parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:25-37) that instructs us not so much to care for the casuistic of the law but rather the good of the person before you and the instance of the woman caught in adultery (Jn 8:3-11) that reminds us to think not first on the punishment how to help and restore a person could have very well been the result of the human formation Jesus received from his guardian and foster father St Joseph, who was a just man, obedient in faith and generous in his attitude. His morality was not of a minimum required, but of a maximum possible, everything for the sake of God's greater glory, not for his own benefit or following his legal rights. This fits squarely with the basic attitude of the Son of God, who although he was equal to God, did not cling to his divine glory as his right, but emptied himself and became a slave, obedient till death on the cross (cf. Phil 2:5-10).

The concluding part of the episode about the issue of Mary's pregnancy reveals yet something more about the faith formation Joseph received at the hands of God. As he decided to dismiss Mary, Joseph is instructed in a dream by the angel of the Lord that "the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit" (Mt 1:20). What could have this meant to Joseph? This is something with no parallel in the whole history of Israel, not even in the whole history of the world known to him. Of course, there were miraculous conceptions in the Old Testament, for instance, in the case of Abraham and Sarah (Gen 16:1; 17:15.19, 21:2), Manoah and his wife (Judges 13:2-3), and Hannah and Elkanah (1 Sam 1:2.6.19-20). But in all those cases human couples were involved. With the special help of God the wives, although barren, conceived the children in a normal way. In the case of Mary, however, it is the work of the Holy Spirit, without the involvement of a human father! Joseph should believe and accept this! Something totally unimaginable for ordinary humans! God formed Joseph to be open to unprecedented events, something more challenging than in the cases of Abraham and others. Joseph believes in the ever new possibilities of God and accepts Mary as his wife. In this sense Joseph is a great example of faith.

Saint Joseph is an example of voluntary *celibacy*. He renounced marital relations with Mary (Mt 1:25), although he had a legal right for this.

This exhibits the dimension of the quality of Joseph's faith and sense of propriety, which consisted for him not claiming a right based on law but voluntarily renouncing it taking into account the sacred context. We can reasonably also conclude that he remained so his entire life. The clause "until she had borne a son" (Mt 1:25^b) cannot be thus understood that he had marital relations with her afterwards, for if Joseph really wanted to make use of his legal right, he could have done it even before the birth of the son Jesus. If he renounced it for whatever considerations, then it is difficult to envisage a different situation after the birth of Jesus, Mary remains for ever sacred, set apart by God for a special purpose. Joseph was thus formed to renounce a valid and legal right. As we know, religious life is essentially linked with renunciation and asceticism, which does not consist in merely forsaking only something that is sinful or illicit, but also in voluntarily leaving what is even rightful and licit. The evangelical counsels demand thus the renunciation of things that a person otherwise is morally entitled to enjoy without any sin. It is here not merely a question of obligation but of an existential attitude of love and generosity of heart in view of a sacred project. Precisely for that reason it would be nonsense to think that a religious priest could marry if the Pope allows married clergy! In other words, one is a religious and hence celibate, not because the canon law does not allow marriage for priestly candidates, but because one is existentially unable to love someone else other than God. Joseph was a formator with a generous heart that viewed things beyond the narrow framework of legally allowed or not. Christian perfection does not seek merely to avoid sins, but to love God to the maximum possible and radically. To the question of the young rich man what he should do to be perfect, Jesus replied not merely to avoid sins or to observe the commandments, but to sell the possessions, give the money to the poor and follow Jesus (Mt 19:21).

We find Joseph also a model of *obedience*. Without any counter question or discussion he carried out the instructions coming from the Lord. As instructed by the angel, Joseph accepted Mary as his wife (Mt 1:24), named the child Jesus (Mt 1:25), and later "took the child and his by night, and went to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod" (Mt 2:14-15), again "took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel" (Mt 2:21). Joseph puts into action what is demanded of him, without any discussion or counter verification. This implicit obedience of faith is also observable in his behaviour when the angel tells him not to hesitate to take Mary as his wife (Mt 1:20). Joseph

faithfully observed also the religious rules of the times. Thus he let the child be circumcised and named Jesus (Lk 2:21), presented the child Jesus to the Lord and offered the prescribed sacrifice (Lk 1:22-24), and went every year to Jerusalem for the feast of the Passover (Lk 2:41).

Saint Joseph was also an example of the life of *poverty*, in the sense he did not cling to the possessions of this world, or amasses huge property for his family. He was a carpenter (cf. Mt 13:55). This means, he worked and worked manually. Manual work was definitely then not the sign of rich people; he earned bread for his family by the sweat of his brow. This was also a human formation that Jesus received from Joseph. As we learn from the gospel according to Mark, Jesus himself probably practiced this job of a carpenter, so much so that he was considered the carpenter (Mk 6:3). The example of Joseph for us is mainly that we have to earn our livelihood by working on the one hand and that as religious and priests we shall not shun manual labour on the other hand. In addition to this the example of Joseph would also urge us to respect all types of work and workers, irrespective of the income generated. The general tendency among people is to respect only the rich (executives and managers), but ignore and even treat disrespectfully those who do ordinary manual works, e.g., daily wagers, domestic servants, etc. As religious and priests we have to be salt of the earth in our respectful behaviour to all types of workers. St Joseph as carpenter and as the patron of labourers teaches us that any type of work has its dignity and that even those who are called for spiritual life, have an obligation to do some manual work.

Saint Joseph became a good formator by living first of all the ideal life of faith himself. His silence indicated in the gospels was not simply a silence of an absence of conversation. He was in fact the best conversationalist, in the sense he was a good listener! He had a listening heart. This reminds us of the episode of king Solomon, in which he prays to God for a docile heart or a “God-listening heart” (1 Kgs 3:9). In the silence of the heart he could listen to the word of God. The gospels present Joseph as a man of prompt action and no words. He would have, of course, not been deaf and dumb. But his all-round personality was characterized by less words and more action in the sense of carrying out the will of God at any cost.

We can also find the humility of Saint Joseph in his silence in the context of finding the child Jesus in the temple (Lk 2:48ff.). We find here Mary, the mother of Jesus, asking the child: “Child, why have you

treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety.” Joseph lets Mary ask the question also on his behalf! This requires a tremendous sense of humility to let someone else to take the lead in a conversation, especially when one is the head of the institution. In our case Joseph does not think of his legal right, but understands the feelings of a mother when she finds her lost child. This understanding heart is what is required in a community life, without which the whole atmosphere of love and harmony in a community, especially in a religious community will definitely suffer much. As in the case of King Solomon who prayed for a listening or understanding heart, we have in the case of Saint Joseph an excellent example of a “man-listening heart” or a heart that understands *human feelings*. In the formation of priests and religious this element is also very important. Listening to God has its other side as listening to fellow human beings, especially to one’s own community members.

Another significant observation with regard to the incident of losing the child Jesus in the temple is that we do not find Joseph putting the blame on Mary or vice-versa. Usually what happens in a family or community is just the opposite, namely, each one tries to find fault with the other as responsible and guilty for a failure or something unfortunate. What Mary and Joseph did, is also here noteworthy, namely, they searched for Jesus in the temple. We, too, have to search our lost peace not in the shopping complexes, entertainment centers, dining places or courts of justice, but in the Temple of God.

Being himself an example of patience, justice, faith, and obedience, Saint Joseph remains a good formator for those in the family and religious and priestly communities and houses of formation.

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Dharmaram Journal of Psycho-Spiritual Formation

VOL. XII, No. 2, July 2021

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