

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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