



K O I N Ō N I A

...together on the journey

THE CONFERENCE OF GENERAL SPIRITUAL ASSISTANTS OFS-YOUFRA

2021 – 2

Year 28

n.110

SECULAR FRANCISCAN LEADERSHIP

SAINT JOSEPH, “SHADOW OF THE FATHER”

Introduction

We link almost immediately Saint Joseph to the virtues of silence and work, but probably not so immediately to our ideas of husband and father. Yet, he is the husband of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and the father of Jesus. This year, the Church commemorates 150 years of the declaration of Saint Joseph as Patron of the Universal Church by Pope Pius IX on December 8, 1870. To mark this recurrence, Pope Francis issued an Apostolic Letter, *Patris corde* “to increase our love for this great saint, to encourage us to implore his intercession and to imitate his virtues and his zeal”¹. This is also our prayer as we offer this short article to the OFS, the Franciscan Youths (YouFra) and their spiritual assistants. We shall articulate this article around the following three themes: Being the shadow of the Father, the vocation of a father and, Saint Joseph and formation.

Being the Shadow of the Father

The word ‘father’ may evoke different feelings in different persons depending on their experience. The Polish writer, Jan Dobraczyński tells the story of Saint Joseph in form of a novel with the title “The Shadow of the Father”². In this novel, Saint Joseph is described as the shadow of the Father. Although nobody has ever seen God, (cf. Jn.1:18), Jesus teaches us to call Him “Our Father”. We need a person we can all look up to and say, “This is a father!” Since Jesus Christ reveals to us the full mystery of man³, not only as individual but also as a relational being, he reveals to us the mystery of a father in Saint Joseph. In Platonic

¹ Apostolic Letter *Patris corde* of the holy Father Francis on the 150th anniversary of the proclamation of saint Joseph as Patron of the Universal Church, 8 December 2020, in https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_letters/documents/papa-francesco-lettera-ap_20201208_patris-corde.html, n° 7; henceforth abbreviated PC.

² Original edition: Cień Ojca, Warsaw, 1977

³ Cf. GS n° 1.

philosophy, the material world is the shadow of the real world, which is above and heavens and spiritual. By presenting Saint Joseph as “the Shadow of the Father”, Dobraczyński is somehow pointing to the patron of the Universal Church as an image on earth of the heavenly Father. Pope Francis observes that all four Gospels refer to Jesus as “the son of Joseph”⁴. We ought to keep in mind that the virginal conception of Jesus was a perfect family secret, such that historically, Joseph was his father to every effect. He has been called putative, adoptive, nutritive father, etc. such that Joseph resumes in himself all the dimensions of fatherhood. In the end, all those who are called “fathers” can find in him a prominent model, a powerful spiritual guide and intercessor.

The Apostle Paul recognizes God as “the Father from whom every fatherhood, in heaven or on earth takes its name” (Eph 3:15). He implies that all those who are fathers, either naturally, spiritually or by adoption, have a common share in the fatherhood of He who is the Father of all. Every fatherhood therefore points to God. In fact, Pope Francis points out that “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.”⁵ Also, “whenever a man accepts responsibility for the life of another, in some way he becomes a father to that person”. This acceptance may happen when the baby is still in the mother’s womb or after birth. In both cases, “Whenever a man accepts responsibility for the life of another, in some way he becomes a father to that person”⁶.

“Every child, says Pope Francis, is the bearer of a unique mystery that can only be brought to light with the help of a father who respects the child’s freedom”⁷. In the Book of the Maccabees, a mother had to witness the execution of her seven sons because they would not eat pork, in a heroic effort to remain faithful to the Law of God. She says to them “I do not know how you appeared in my womb; it was not I who endowed you with breath and life, I had not the shaping of your every part”; (2Macc 7:22). Kahlil Gibran says, “Your children, although they come through you, they are not from you”⁸. Although the progress of science and technology can now explain with fascinating detail certain biological processes that happen from conception to birth, it is still true that every child remains unique and a mystery even to those who actively take part in its conception. No one chooses his or her sex, nor do parents choose the sex for their children. Some children are born with disabilities and others with deformations. Others are born with illnesses and others healthier. Parents who accept a child as he/she comes are truly the shadow of the Father of all.

⁴ PC n° 1.

⁵ PC n° 7.

⁶ Idem.

⁷ Idem.

⁸ Kahlil Gibran, *The Prophet*, 1926, ed. 1980.

However, the image of a Shadow fits better the father figure, because the relationship of a child to the father is not as immediate as that to the mother.

The vocation of a father

“Fathers are not born, but are made”⁹. They are made when they accept the call and assume the responsibility over a child. For Saint Joseph, the determinant moment came when he accepted the call to take Mary as his wife and to name the Child whom she conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit, (cf. Mt 1:18-21).

“Our world today needs fathers”, and “the Church too needs fathers”¹⁰, says Pope Francis. The reason why our world is in a kind of crisis of fatherhood is most likely related to the religious crisis of our time. Roberta Vinerba has outlined this crisis in a book entitled *fare I padre essere figli*¹¹. As a shadow has no existence of its own but is always a shadow of something, so too are fathers. They lose their very *raison-d’être* the moment they lose connection with God.

Saint Joseph reveals to us something of the humility of Jesus Christ who, “though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God, a thing to be grasped at; but he humbled himself taking the form of a servant” (Ph 2:6-7). By the virginal conception, Jesus made himself a beggar of the motherhood of Mary, and of the fatherhood of Joseph. Both the Virgin mother and the chaste father were free to accept this child or to refuse him their love and protection. By his virginal conception, Jesus became the poorest among the poor, a child who had no claim to the protection of both parents. Jesus became the representation of all those born or to-be-born children who are crying out for acceptance and adoption. By accepting him, Joseph became the model of all men who accept children into their lives and accompany them in their growth. By bringing him up, protecting him, providing for mother and child and educating him, Joseph became the model of all fathers who commit themselves to the education of their children.

“Every priest or bishop, says Pope Francis, should be able to add, with the apostle, ‘I became your father in Christ Jesus through the Gospel’”¹². The vocation to fatherhood does not regard only the human family, but also the spiritual community. Every priest, bishop and formator should find in Saint Joseph a model for their vocation as fathers. Saint Francis of Assisi says, “If I had as much wisdom as Solomon and found impoverished priests of this world, I would not preach in their parishes against their will. And I desire to respect, love and honour them and all others as my lords. And I do not want to consider any sin in them

⁹ PC n° 7.

¹⁰ Idem.

¹¹ Cf. VINERBA R, *Fare I padre essere figli*, paoline, Milano 2008.

¹² PC n° 7.

because I discern the Son of God in them and they are my lords. And I act in this way because, in this world, I see nothing corporally of the most high Son of God except His most holy Body and Blood which they receive and they alone administer to others”¹³. In other words, as Saint Joseph received Jesus and presented him to the world by giving him the name by which all are saved, so too does every priest receive Jesus in the humility of the Holy Eucharist and offer Him to humanity. In a certain sense, priests are chaste fathers of Jesus in the Eucharist, and therefore they are a shadow of the Father. Let us now consider Saint Joseph as a formator.

Saint Joseph and formation

“The fecundity of conjugal love cannot be reduced solely to the procreation of children, but must extend to their moral education and their spiritual formation”¹⁴. In Nazareth, “Joseph taught Jesus to walk, taking him by the hand. ... such that in Joseph, Jesus saw the tender love of God”¹⁵. This image fits well for a formator. Formation, in fact is not indoctrination or mere transmission of information but taking another by the hand to teach him/her to walk the Gospel way in a Franciscan fraternity. To take a child by the hand, the adult normally goes down to the level of the child and walks at the pace of the child. This is the attitude that good educators and formators assume. It is the attitude of Jesus Christ in the incarnation; he humbled himself to take humanity by the hand. It was much easier for Jesus to write or reveal in some other way a series of laws for humanity to follow for their salvation. But he chose to humble himself to become one like us.

“Being a father entails introducing children to life and reality”¹⁶. Formation is not a passing on of abstract theories, but an initiation into life and reality. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the preventive measure of social distancing has imposed a kind of psychological distance between persons making personal contacts even more challenging. Individuals, communities or even nations are closing themselves in a kind of ghettos of fear and self-conservation. I remember a father complaining to us that his son no longer wanted to go out of the house. To take the hand of the other person means to touch and hold; to assist him/her overcome the fears and, real or imaginary obstacles that we encounter when we go out of our safety zones to face a new reality. This provides a sense of security and belonging that are necessary for the gradual insertion of the new arrivals into the fraternity. This is what Joseph did to Jesus. This is what formators are to do in the name of the Fraternity. Formation programs must serve this purpose in a personalized formative journey.

¹³ Testament 9.

¹⁴ Catechism of the Catholic Church, n° 2221.

¹⁵ PC n° 2.

¹⁶ PC n° 7.

“Whenever a man accepts responsibility for the life of another, in some way he becomes a father to that person”¹⁷. By the same principle, persons become formators when they accept the service to accompany others in their journey as companions and guides. Like Saint Joseph, formators know that they are entrusted with the care of persons who are probably infinitely greater than the formators themselves. This consciousness keeps them humble and committed to accompany those entrusted to them, because each person is unique and a bearer of a unique mission.

One of the virtues that Pope Francis outlines in Saint Joseph is acceptance: “Joseph accepted Mary unconditionally”¹⁸. By so doing, he accepted Jesus unconditionally. Formators need such unconditional acceptance of those whom the Holy Spirit leads to the Fraternity. The Holy Father observes, “Often in life, things happen whose meaning we do not understand. Our first reaction is frequently one of disappointment and rebellion. Joseph set aside his own 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 own history”¹⁹. Reverent silence and participative listening are expressions of this acceptance.

A formator essentially accompanies others in their vocational journey, assisting them in discerning the will of God and answering to the call with freedom, commitment and generosity. Saint Paul addressed the Christians of Galatia as “my little children for whom I am again in pains of child birth until Christ is fully formed in you” (Gal 4:19). The formator is one who accepts to bear these pains of childbirth that Christ may be fully formed in another. This is what Joseph bore that Jesus may grow in stature and grace to assume total responsibility over his mission. To accompany means, “*To create spaces that make responsibility, confidence and transparency possible in every domain*”²⁰. Priority is given to helping the other to grow *in freedom, respecting the uniqueness of every person*²¹. Saint Joseph who loved Jesus “*with a father’s heart*”²² and accompanied him in his growth to maturity enlightens us in this service.

A formator must gradually become “useless”. “A father is most a father and educator at the point when he becomes ‘useless’, when he sees that his child has become independent and can walk the paths of life unaccompanied”²³. In other words, the shadow of the Father must fade away as those they accompany mature in the life. We can paraphrase the Holy Father that “a formator is most a formator at the point when he/she becomes ‘useless’, when he/she

¹⁷ PC n° 7.

¹⁸ PC n°4.

¹⁹ Idem.

²⁰ *Ratio formationis ordinis of the Order of Capuchin Friars Minor*, n° 149.

²¹Cf. *Ratio formationis Ordinis*, idem.

²² PC, Introduction.

²³ PC n° 7.

sees that those they have formed have become independent and can walk the paths of the OFS unaccompanied”. Such formators are free of a possessive spirit that, as the Holy Father says again, is the contrary of chastity²⁴. As the newly arrived progress in the Order, their formators become “useless” or even begin learning from those that they have formed. They may say what Saint Francis said to the Brothers shortly before his blessed death: “I have done what was mine to do. May the Lord show you yours”.

Conclusion

The spiritual path that Joseph traces for us and especially for those of us who are fathers and formators “is not one that explains, but accepts”²⁵. Joseph accepted to become the shadow of the Father so that the Son of God should become the Son of Man. In the above-mentioned novel of Dobraczyński, the author puts on the lips of the Blessed Virgin Mary the affirmation that we are all called to be in some way “shadows of the Father”. Although every fatherhood in heaven and on earth takes its name from God, (cf. Eph 3:14), Saint Joseph, assumes in himself the model of vocation for every father; biological, adoptive or spiritual. As the universal Church looks up to him as Patron, Pope Francis invites us to find in him the model for every Christian. Fathers and formators can find in him a model, guide and intercessor for their specific calling and mission. The words of Jesus apply specially to Saint Joseph when he says, “you will be able to tell them by their fruits.” (Mt 7:20). Although we honour Saint Joseph for being the husband of the Blessed Virgin Mary and father of Jesus, of him too, Jesus would say: “blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it” (Lk 11:28).

Here again is the prayer that the Holy Father offers at the end of his Apostolic Letter:

*Hail, Guardian of the Redeemer,
Spouse of the Blessed Virgin Mary.
To you God entrusted his only Son;
in you Mary placed her trust;
with you Christ became man.*

*Blessed Joseph, to us too,
show yourself a father
and guide us in the path of life.
Obtain for us grace, mercy and courage,
and defend us from every evil. Amen.*

²⁴ Idem.

²⁵ PC, n° 4.

NEWS

- **Commemoration of the 8th Centenary of Memoriale Propositi, (1221-2021)**

A commemorative celebration to mark the 8th Centenary of *Memoriale propositi*, the first rule of the Third Order of Saint Francis, was organized on Saturday, May 22, at the Basilica of Saints Cosmas and Damian in Via dei Fori Imperiali, seat of the General Curia of the Friars of the TOR. The celebration was attended by the representatives of the Third Regular Order and the Secular Franciscan Order and some invitees in a limited number due to restrictions of assemblies caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Worthy of particular note was the presence of His Eminence Card. Mario Grech, Secretary General of the Synod of Bishops who gave initial greetings to all. Fr. Amando Trujillo Cano, Minister General of the TOR, coordinated the activities of the celebration. The programme included four speeches on the *Memoriale* as well as two moments of prayer, at the beginning and at the end and other special greetings. The OFS General Minister was represented by Isabelle di Paola, OFS, Secretary General. The General Minister of the Order of Friars Minor Conventuals, Fr. Carlos Trovarelli sent a greeting that was read to all, while, the General Assistants, Pedro Zitha, OFM and Francis Bongajum Dor, OFMCAP. represented the General Ministers of their respective Orders. The celebration ended with light refreshment in the courtyard of the basilica. The participants received in memory a volume of the last book by Lino Temperini on the history of the *Memoriale propositi* and some souvenirs.

- **Netherlands - National Elective Chapter**

The National Elective Chapter of the OFS of the Netherlands was held from 11 to 13 June at Nieuwkuñk. The Chapter was presided over by Ana Fruk, OFS, delegated by the Minister General Tibor Kauser, OFS and Br. Wim Pot, OFM delegate of the Conference of Spiritual Assistants (CAS). The Chapter was attended by 15 capitulars, 1 religious and 8 observers. On 13 June the new members of the National Council of the Netherlands were elected: Theo Reuling, OFS re-elected as National Minister and Michel Versteegh, OFS, as International Councillor. The chapter was lived in a fraternal atmosphere from the start till the end.

- **Guatemala- National Elective Chapter**

From 12 to 14 June the National Fraternity of Guatemala celebrated its elective Chapter at the Diocesan Pastoral Centre at Km 166, Jalada, Guatemala. It was presided over by

Isabel Líma Perez delegates of Minister General Tibor Kauser and Br. Gerardo Moore, OFM delegate of the Conference of Spiritual Assistants (CAS). The Chapter had as its theme: "800 years of Franciscan life, in the heart of our spirituality". There were 59 capitulars, 2 observers and the Bishop of the diocese of Jacapa, Mons Benedicto Moscos Miranda who presided at the inaugural Holy Mass. Mariano Rodríguez was elected as National Minister and International Councillor, Deputy Minister and as Substitute International Councillor Felipe Vasquez Zanchez, José Luis Tzirin Zapeta as formator. The Chapter was held in a very fraternal atmosphere with a joyful participation, all members are determined to carry forward the Secular Franciscan Order of Guatemala as indicated in the theme of the Chapter.

- Italy – National elective chapter

The OFS national fraternity of Italy held an elective chapter at the Domus Laetitia in Assisi from 1 to 4 July. All 46 capitulars convoked for the chapter were present. A few were represented by their delegates. In addition to these, there were some observers, all 4 spiritual assistants and some guests. It was presided over by Tibor Kauser, OFS General Minister, accompanied by Br. Francis Bongajum Dor, OFM Cap, General Spiritual Assistant. As the chapter had been delayed for over year due to the Corona virus pandemic, the participants arrived with zeal and visible joy. After the general introduction, and other preliminary tasks, the afternoon of Friday July 2, was spent in prayer, confessions and Mass at the Sanctuary of the Spoliation in Assisi. The elective session was held in the afternoon of Saturday July 3. Luca Piras was elected national minister to replace Paola Braggion. He doubles as international councillor according to the national statutes. Tibor Kauser confirmed and installed the new council at the end of the elections. The closing Mass was celebrated at the main chapel of the Domus Laetitia, presided over by Br. Francis Dor and concelebrated by all four national spiritual assistants and another visiting friar. This chapter was well prepared in every aspect, and lived in an atmosphere of prayer, serenity and fraternal joy.