

HOW TO LOVE THE MEMBERS LIKE A FATHER

God called Joseph to be the human father of Jesus, an example of a father for every human being.

The figure of the "father" has many facets: we speak of a family father, a spiritual father, a father even in the economic experience (hence the term "paternalism" of which Father Fernando spoke), and we also use the expression "father of the Fatherland" or father of an idea.

The Cell Leader, although we do not use this terminology to identify him, is also called to embody paternal attitudes in the spiritual journey of the members of the Cell that the Grace of God has entrusted to him. In the spiritual family that is the Cell, each newcomer who has accepted Jesus' invitation to entrust himself to Him needs to find a father figure, because he is like the newborn child in the small community in which the Leader, by the grace of God, plays the role of head of the family, the role of father.

St Joseph, "because a righteous man" (Mt 1:19) welcomed Jesus as his own son. In a situation that was humanly and so embarrassing in the face of customs and laws, even compromising, he knew how to live his task as a father with a dedication and love that we can take as the best example for every human father and also for the Cell Leader.

Pope Francis, in the introduction to the Apostolic Letter, draws our attention to: *"How many people daily exercise patience and offer hope, taking care to spread not panic, but shared responsibility."*, among them also fathers and grandparents and we can add: also the Cell Leader.

The Pope goes on to say: *"Each of us can discover in Joseph – the man who goes unnoticed, a daily, discreet and hidden presence – an intercessor, a support and a guide in times of trouble."*

Let us take these characteristics as three goals for the Leader:

- Unnoticed: because humility and meekness of heart are essential, even if the Leader has a more solid spiritual journey behind him, this should never be boasted of, but be an object of gratitude to God for the gift received.

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- Daily presence: like St Joseph, always attentive to the needs and safety of the Holy Family.
- Discreet and hidden: because he does not seek appearances and recognition.
- Intercessor: because in his prayers he never fails to pay attention to the members of the Cell and their difficulties and needs.
- Support and guide: ready to listen and advise, to discern and suggest the way of the Gospel and fraternal charity.

The Leader can follow this advice of Pope Francis and find in St. Joseph both the intercessor and the example to live the call to be like a father, at every level of the evangelization experience in the Cells.

When we have a task of responsibility for others we are always invited to be inspired by his example: *“The greatness of Saint Joseph is that he was the spouse of Mary and the father of Jesus. In this way, he placed himself, in the words of Saint John Chrysostom, “at the service of the entire plan of salvation” .”*

According to St Paul VI, in what way is the fatherhood of St Joseph concretely manifested? *“By making 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 completely 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”*. The same logic of giving, guided by the Holy Spirit, is capable of producing the fruit of the paternal life of the Leader.

If we expect from the Leader to follow this advice of St. Paul VI, we must indicate to the Leader, as a lay person committed to the experience of the Cells, to make of his or her life:

- A Service, which, in the scale of values of one's life commitments, places on top availability, perseverance, every concern in favour of the cell, secondary only to the primary family and work duties, which must remain higher. Anything that is strictly personal should not be considered a priority to the service of the cell, precisely because, as a father, he has responsibility for the spiritual journey of his children.

- A Sacrifice, which as a result of what has been said, puts the other in the first place, before one's self, and responds to the evangelical principle of *"there is more joy in giving than in receiving"*; it is the perspective of sacrifice, of the Cross, that is proposed to the Leader, because the purpose of the Cell is to propose the message of evangelisation, the Kerygma: the mystery of the Incarnation and the redemptive mission".

The first image of a father's heart that Pope Francis highlights in St Joseph is the TENDERNESS with which he accompanies the growth of Jesus. For the Leader, too, this is the first aspect to be taken care of in the relationship with the brothers entrusted to him to help them grow spiritually in *"wisdom and grace before God and others"*, not only within the cell, but also in their own Oikos. Shyness, the disappointment of failure, doubt, insecurity, are all situations that can affect the brother of the cell, and not just the latest arrival. The first arrivals may perhaps experience tiredness or habit, situations of weakness, in which the leader must know how to exercise with tenderness, the art of the father, always remembering that God's plans are realised *"through and in spite of our weakness"*.

Pope Francis insistently repeats, *"Tenderness is the best way to touch the frailty within us. [...] We know that God's truth does not condemn, but instead welcomes, embraces, sustains and forgives us."*

The Leader, as a father, is also called to be a teacher of HOSPITALITY.

St Joseph is the icon of this virtue, in fact he knows how to receive Mary as his bride, trusting in the word of the Angel: *"The nobility of Joseph's heart is such that what he learned from the law he made dependent on charity."*, the Pope indicates, while suggesting to imitate the respectful and delicate attitude lived by the Saint. *"Joseph's attitude encourages us to accept and welcome others as they are, without exception, and to show special concern for the weak, for God chooses what is weak (cf. 1 Cor 1:27)."*

From my experience in the cell, now for well over thirty years, I can testify that welcoming the weakest helps the whole cell to grow in charity, according to what we have learnt: *"seek the wound and heal it"*.

Even in the first audience that Pope Francis granted us, he wanted to underline this attitude, pointing it out as fundamental in the Cell "You Cells wish to make your own this style of community life, capable of welcoming everyone without judging anyone".

A final paternal characteristic of the Leader, which we can grasp in the *Patris Corde* is the COURAGE to GROW TOWARD the mature PATERNAL FIGURE, which shows itself. With different aspects:

- In the PROTECTION of the latest arrival: perhaps at the dawn of his conversion, the new member needs *"to be defended, protected, cared for and raised"* because he enters an environment which has already made a journey, acquired experience, modes of expression, created habits for that community which could degenerate into becoming comfortable and abandoning the drive to evangelise the oikos. *"Whenever a man accepts responsibility for the life of another, in some way he becomes a father to that person."* Thus the Leader for the new comer.
- COURAGE TO PROMOTE SPIRITUAL GROWTH: the Leader like a father, is attentive to the spiritual growth of children, witnessing and proposing the task of disciple-missionary, as St Joseph taught Jesus to do the work of carpenter, making him love it by the example of his dedication. St Paul also points out the way of imitating the good example as a path to growth.
- PRUDENCE AND DISCERNMENT: in recognising the gifts and charisms of each one, COURAGE in asking for a step further, a new responsibility in the Cell, because the task of the father *"entails introducing children to life and reality. Not holding them back, being overprotective or possessive, but rather making them capable of deciding for themselves, enjoying freedom and exploring new possibilities."*, of course, because the goal of the Cell is that of multiplication. This is perhaps the leader's most difficult task, but also the most important. To carry it out effectively, it requires prayer, love, listening, imagination, the ability to transmit the joy of service and to communicate the vision of a Church that is always striving to proclaim with its life and gift of Jesus, who desires the salvation of every child.

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This is why the Church needs many fathers who, like St Joseph, share the great project of God's love.