religions

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The Impact of Family Dynamics on the Image of God and Maturation in Faith

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Abstract: In postmodern society, many protagonists promote a "distorted and unnatural" image of marriage and family, while others consider marriage and the family unit relics of the past. The contemporary world is characterized by different kinds of "turbulence" that affect individuals on both psychological and spiritual levels, as well as by extreme oscillations between a normal and a distorted image of the family and the image of God. In this context, all Catholics, especially Catholic families, are called to be "protagonists of the New Evangelization". However, due to Catholic "mediocrity", the family, which is the heart of the New Evangelization, can become less effective and limited in its evangelical mission. The individualism of our postmodern era, along with the prevalence of unstable and fluid relationships, impacts family bonds. Catholic families are not immune to the negative trends that affect families today. Many Catholic families face challenges and difficulties that can damage the relationship between parent and child. This article aims to explore how contemporary family dynamics within Catholic families influence the attachment between parent and child. Furthermore, it examines how children's perceptions of parents relate to their perceptions of God. The intention is also to recognize the consequences of certain images of God on religious development. Does God become a "substitute attachment figure" when a parent is absent from the family? If so, how can religious education help individuals develop a more mature faith and relationship with God, moving beyond an infantile attachment?

Keywords: family; relationship; maturity; faith; image of God; religious education



Academic Editor: Carl-Mario Sultana

Received: 12 December 2024
Revised: 25 March 2025
Accepted: 31 March 2025
Published: 7 April 2025

Citation: Smoljo-Dobrovoljski, Sanda. 2025. The Impact of Family Dynamics on the Image of God and Maturation in Faith. *Religions* 16: 474. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel16040474

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1. Introduction

A glance at the quality of family relationships and commitments in the contemporary world indicates—to a greater or lesser extent—that many relationships are unstable, fluid and unbalanced. It seems that the spirit of unity and communion in many family communities has been substituted by a spirit of individualism and conformity, in which the pleasure principle often takes precedence. There are many sources which point out that weak and fragile relationships are symptoms of a more profound problem (Castellano et al. 2010; Carli et al. 2009; Kernberg 1995). In this context, the Church's teaching affirms: "The imbalances under which the modern world labors are linked with that more basic imbalance which is rooted in the heart of man. For in man himself many elements wrestle with one another. Thus, on the one hand, as a creature he experiences his limitations in a multitude of ways; on the other, he feels himself to be boundless in his desires and summoned to a higher life" (Second Vatican Council 1965, n. 10).

In today's world, generally progressive social change and legislation have created a new and distorted "definition" of family, by which, among other things, it has become more

and more popular for two people to live together without being married. In postmodern society, many promote a "distorted and unnatural" image of marriage and family, while others consider marriage and the family unit relics of the past. As Pope Francis states: "The individualism of our postmodern and globalized era favors a lifestyle which weakens the development and stability of personal relationships and distorts family bonds" (Papa Franjo 2013, n. 67). It is evident that the widespread recognition of a family crisis has engaged all relevant ecclesiastical and social experts in efforts to help families overcome these challenges and rediscover the fundamental values given by God Himself. A society that rejects or denies the transcendent reality of the family is more inclined to impose a distorted image of it placing Christian families in the difficult position of having to defend traditional family values. Recognizing these challenges, the Church seeks, together with families, to find the best solutions for addressing this crisis. The most significant Church event in this area was the Synod on the Family, held from 5 to 19 October 2014 under the theme "The Pastoral Challenges of the Family in the Context of Evangelization". The second Synod followed from 4 to 25 October 2015, under the theme "The Vocation and Mission of the Family in the Church and in the Contemporary World".

This Synod demonstrated the Church's commitment to helping families navigate crises, support those who have been affected, and work toward preventing future crises. In fact, at the core of these efforts lies a clear desire to renew the transcendental nature of marriage and family in postmodern society. In other words, it can be said that the Catholic Church seeks to restore the vertical dimension of marriage and family.

Considering the previous observations, this paper aims to achieve two main objectives. The first is to analyze family dynamics from a biblical perspective, present the teachings of the Church on marriage and family, and explore the challenges and vulnerabilities of modern family life, including relational bonds between the spouses and between parents and children. The second objective is to examine how today's modern family dynamic can influence the growth and development of children, particularly how family dynamics can impact the image of God and maturation in faith. Beyond merely diagnosing positive or negative correlations between attachment to parents and attachment to God, this paper seeks to offer a path to healing. It aims to explore how one can purify personal projections of God and foster a more mature faith.

2. The Teaching of the Church on Marriage and Family

Marriage is an original gift of God to humanity. Even though sin entered the world damaging the marital relationship, this gift has not lost its purpose or meaning but has been redeemed by Christ, elevated to a sacrament, and restored in the image of the Holy Trinity. According to God's plan, the relationship forged between man and woman in the marital union is unique. For centuries, the Catholic Church, guided by the Holy Spirit, has reflected on marriage. Numerous documents address Church teachings on conjugal love, responsible parenthood and natural family planning. In the following section, we present essential elements of marriage according to the Magisterium of the Church. Catholic teaching understands marriage as a reality which is closely and inseparably connected with the creation of man. This originates from the book of Genesis, which does not end with the creation of man living alone, but is completed with the creation of woman and, consequently, the formation of the couple. God created man in his image; in the divine image he created him; male and female he created them. God blessed them, saying: "Be fertile and multiply, fill the earth and subdue it" (Gen 1: 27–28). This biblical text indicates that God's primordial plan is fully realized within and through the couple. The male and female made "for each other" (Catechism of the Catholic Church 1993, n. 372) "become one body" in the sacrament of marriage (Gen 2: 24.). As a couple, they are endowed with

the capacity for fertile love that requires responsibility in their shared life together. This gift—to be co-creative and cooperative in transmitting human life—means that the couple participates in God's fatherhood. The institution of marriage, enriched by special gifts and laws from the Creator, is not a merely human institution for two fundamental reasons: God is the author of marriage (Second Vatican Council 1965, n. 48); and marriage has the dignity of a sacrament (Code of Canon Law 1983, can. 1055 § 1). Faithful to the primordial biblical image, Catholic teaching holds that marriage between baptized persons is an "intimate partnership of married life and love" (Second Vatican Council 1965, n. 48), which, by its very nature, is ordered to: the good of the spouses and the generation and education of offspring (Code of Canon Law 1983, can. 1055 § 1).

2.1. Ideal of Marital Love

In light of Catholic teaching on marriage, this section will present certain components of the ideal of marital love within Catholic marriage. Love, as the "fundamental and innate vocation of every human being" (Catechism of the Catholic Church 1993, n. 2392), finds its profound realization and fulfilment within marital love. Considering some of the existing definitions of marital love, they can be summed up as follows: marital love is an attitude of doing, from the heart, what is good for the partner and what is good for marital communion. This definition indicates that marital love, as such, is ordered not only for the good of the couple but also for that of the individual spouses.

The good of the spouses is the primary purpose of marriage and is realized through complementarity between the man and the woman on all levels. It involves mutual and unconditional support from each other, sharing both the joys and sorrows of the marital journey, unselfish self-giving and serving in love. It also includes reciprocal and continuous growth through total and sincere self-surrender to one another. The good of the spouses tends to be definitive and seeks the integral good in living sexuality, fidelity (conjugal chastity) and fertility. In other words, the good of the spouses encompasses physical, psychological, moral and spiritual complementarity.

The procreation and education of offspring is the second purpose of marriage. Marital love, by its nature, tends to be fertile. The child, who "springs from the very heart of that mutual giving, as its fruit and fulfillment" (Catechism of the Catholic Church 1993, n. 2366) is an expression and reflection of conjugal love. Fertility, as a good and a gift to the spouses, leads to a deeper communion of life and love, and as such, excludes any form of morally unacceptable means, such as contraception. In addition to their responsibility for family planning and bringing children into the world, the spouses are also responsible for their education. The Christian family, often referred to as "the domestic church", is the privileged setting where a child receives the treasure of the faith and where human and Christian values are cultivated.

Sacramental grace is a constitutive part of the marital bond in Christian marriage. It helps spouses perfect their love and communion, as well as overcome painful experiences such as domination, infidelity, divisions, egocentric aspiration, conflicts and other difficulties in the relationship, which can seriously disturb marital love or even lead to separation. Inasmuch as sacramental grace comes through Christ, it implies that Christian marriage is not merely a dyadic bond, but entails a triadic relationship because Christ "encounters Christian spouses through the sacrament of Matrimony. Christ dwells with them, gives them the strength to take up their crosses and so follow him, to rise again after they have fallen, to forgive one another, to bear one another's burdens, to be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ, and to love one another with supernatural, tender, and fruitful love" (Catechism of the Catholic Church 1993, n. 1642). In order to grow as a couple in communion with Christ, spouses are called to engage in shared sacramental life and prayer.

2.2. The Holy Trinity—A Model for Intersubjective Relationships

Although the motivation for entering the sacrament of marriage may be complex, there is no clear dividing line between conscious and unconscious motives. Nevertheless, it can be assumed that the fundamental motivation for the sacrament of marriage, which has a divine character, is based on values intrinsic to the sacrament of marriage. Therefore, Catholic couples preparing for marriage in the Church must be aware that they are committing to and uniting themselves into a new reality—one that, while remaining partially natural, is ultimately elevated to a supernatural communion. Within this divine institution, spouses, as they live out their intersubjective relationship, do not pursue the realization of their natural potentialities (self-realization) as their ultimate goal, which is the primary focus of humanistic psychology. Rather, self-realization is not the primary goal, but emerges as a byproduct of theocentric self-transcendence.

To the degree that they are aware of and willing to make the necessary personal efforts, while also investing their energy and voluntarily directing themselves toward theocentric self-transcendence, spouses respond to God's call and fulfil the authentic nature of the sacrament of marriage. Marriage, in both its natural and transcendent dimensions, should be based on communication and love, mirroring the unity within the Holy Trinity. In order to be capable of unconditional love and free self-giving within an intersubjective relationship, each partner should reflect on theocentric self-transcendence before marriage. In other words, they should already be sufficiently grounded in God. When partners are not "sufficiently mature" psychologically and spiritually, one must ask how they propose to live the sacrament of marriage, i.e., how do they intend to live in Christian Intersubjectivity? It will be very difficult for them to accept that Catholic partners should not strive for self-transcendence in order to perfect either themselves or their intersubjective relations. In other words, to be a Catholic couple and to nurture mature Christian Intersubjectivity, partners should not limit their concern to subjective and relational satisfaction. Instead, the source of their satisfaction should spring from a deep and intimate relationship with God, i.e., from a deep friendship with Christ. The pleasure and the good that derive from this communication also manifest as satisfaction on other psycho-physiological and psycho-social levels. It is not uncommon for Catholic couples to mainly strive for realization on the psycho-social level. In the gradual growth of Christian Intersubjectivity, this should be seen as a transitional developmental stage before a new integrative psycho-spiritual stage begins to emerge.

The theological principle "Gratia supponit naturam" means that grace builds on nature. It indicates that the natural component has its place, but it is incomplete without the supernatural, as the supernatural component needs the natural (Lewis 2012). Therefore, the Catholic couple should not remain focused solely on the natural—the psycho-social level—which corresponds to a humanist view; however, in their journey together as a couple, they should grow toward the psycho-spiritual level. In other words, a Catholic couple living their Christian Intersubjectivity in the pluralism of I and you should continuously evolve into we, reflecting the mystery of the Holy Trinity (Tamarut 2016).

3. Prayer Within Family

Prayer is God's gift to the Catholic family, bringing them together in prayer to turn toward one another in love and, united, lift their gaze toward heaven. The prayer of the family is the "place" where Christian Intersubjectivity participates in Divine Intersubjectivity. It is the place where all members offer their weaknesses and, in turn, receive strength.

For the purposes of this study, the definition of prayer presented in the Catechism of the Catholic Church, which refers to the individual, is adapted to the context of the Catholic

family. When a Catholic family sincerely cooperates with God, they open themselves to be transformed by Him. However, as previously noted, a sufficient level of existential maturity is necessary for the partners to pray in a truly mature way, that is, to be humble before God and before each other. Prayer, as an ontological necessity of the Catholic family, also has pedagogical and psychotherapeutic effects. There are many studies that confirm the "therapeutic" effects of prayer and faith (Bošnjaković and Smoljo-Dobrovoljski 2023, pp. 316–17; Sadock and Sadock 2007, p. 853). When family members come together in prayer, offering their hearts and turning to look toward heaven, they can receive strength, encouragement, and inspiration. Also, their "sight" becomes clearer and sharper, because the encounter with Christ reveals priorities and reminds them of the purpose of being together.

Metaphorically speaking, Christ provides them with a "compass" so that they may not lose themselves in many obligations and tasks of daily life. More than that, he "teaches" them how to love and forgive one another, offering His own example. Maturity allows family members to become true "cooperators" with Christ, whereas immaturity can reduce the prayer to nothing more than an "oasis of escape" from the demanding reality or a means for the members to fulfill their affective dependence. The encounter between the family and Christ also brings affective satisfaction, such as consolation, not as a motivating force, but as a by-product of true communion with Him. In other words, the family seeks to encounter Christ Himself first and foremost, with affective consolation arising as a natural outcome rather than the primary motivation. In this regard, Jesus Himself invites families, "[c]ome to me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart, and you will find rest for your souls" (Mt 11: 28–29).

It is reasonable to claim that Christian Intersubjectivity exerts a transforming force only when members dispose their will, affections, and intellect to Jesus, and actively cooperate through daily prayer with Him, and when the partners are capable—to some extent—of incorporating the gifts of prayer into their daily lives. In other words, when the family members possess sufficient psychological and spiritual resources and are flexible and well-disposed for continuous growth.

Prayer does not follow a linear progression but instead grows in spiral continuity, deepening over time (Alphonso 2005), which indicates that the relation with Christ becomes deeper both within the individual and between the partners. According to some studies, this interpersonal spiral of growth through prayer is a significant predictor of marital happiness and satisfaction. Prayer helps the couple to handle conflicts and fosters mutual respect (Lambert et al. 2010, pp. 126–32). Furthermore, several studies (Fincham and Beach 2014) show the impact of prayer on both the protective and risk factors in relationships. By maintaining a real and sincere relationship with Christ, listening and following his progressive pedagogical guidance, and accepting His gifts with humility, the Catholic family gradually transforms, and through their lives, they promote the Kingdom of God. All these elements highlight the personal and intersubjective effects and value of prayer for the family. The implication is that prayer is not only a value but a necessity within the couple's dynamic, helping them grow together as a couple and a family. Just as a couple needs material food every day, they also need spiritual nourishment, which they receive through prayer and sacramental life.

"Divine worship in prayer" (Catechism of the Catholic Church 1993, n. 1657) is an efficacious "means" that can help the family in the "formation of their hearts", drawing them closer to the likeness of Jesus's heart. In other words, as Mother Teresa affirms (1985) (following Father Peyton): "[t]he family that prays together stays together; and if you stay together, you will love one another with the same love with which God loves each one of us. Where there is love there is unity, peace and joy". These words attributed to Mother

Theresa align with another study that examined the relationship between couple prayer, trust and unity (Lambert et al. 2012). The researchers found that praying with and for a partner increases the trust between the partners and unity between them. In other words, we can say that those who pray together, stay together, because Christ is present between them, binding them together.

4. Communication Within Family

Among many communication skills, we can identify three key skills that form a foundational part of good communication, particularly in dealing with aggression and other unpleasant emotions. These skills are based on the biblical exhortation given by James 1: 19, "everyone should be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath".

Accordingly, we can differentiate three important aspects of good communication: assertiveness, sincere listening and unconditional acceptance.

Assertiveness, in this context, means expressing one's own feelings and desires clearly; that is, the person expresses unambiguously what he or she wishes in the intersubjective relationship, and does not blame or demean the other.

Sincere listening involves the effort to truly understand what the partner is saying, to grasp his or her "angle of truth," and to show interest and empathy (Worthington 2001) for what he or she is experiencing. Compassionate empathy is essential for sincere listening.

Unconditional acceptance means that whatever is said between the partners within their "intersubjective field" is accepted without criticism or judgment. This acceptance is unconditional—it does not depend on reciprocal conditions, such as "I will accept your opinion if you accept mine".

This way of communicating can help the partners deal with accumulated frustration in an appropriate and constructive way, prevent the development of unproductive aggression and help cope with any other intrapsychic or intersubjective conflict within the couple and family dynamic, particularly in relation to children.

In addition, such a way of mutual sharing of intersubjective states, when experienced, can increase intimacy and encourage both partners and the entire family toward continued growth. In other words, these three skills may help to improve intersubjectivity, i.e., to improve the interpersonal relationship between the partners and between the parents and children. Likewise, they may facilitate and encourage growth from the actual we toward the ideal we. It can be noted that this triple process of communication between the family members is somewhat reminiscent of a psychotherapeutic setting, sharing several common elements. Family members strive to create an intersubjective field such that they can feel "safe, secure, accepted, and understood" (Weiner 1998, p. 25), allowing them to express freely what they feel and what they want. When this is not possible, it is likely that they will tend to repress their "unacceptable" emotions, which, over time, can negatively affect their relationship as a couple and family, as feelings will always find an outlet—if not directly, then indirectly.

One of the obstacles to good communication and constructive conflict resolution within the intersubjective dynamic of the family is defense—resistance to be involved in deeper communication and avoidance of confrontation of problematic issues between the members. These defensive and resistant behaviors between the members may stem from the affective unconscious. For example, a partner might avoid confrontation because, as a child, when she confronted her mother, she was humiliated.

Accordingly, the family members may react in a way that leaves them unable to understand why they are behaving as they are or why they are experiencing such considerable inner tension. Intrapsychic tension in the individual can create tension within the family. In this state of intersubjective tension, they can say or do things they later regret, especially

when individuals, under the influence of immaturity, say things to each other which are not related to the present problem, or engage in actions intended to "pay back" for earlier problems (Kernberg 1995, pp. 93–110). This can considerably aggravate the intersubjective relationship and lead to disequilibrium between family members. This may also seriously hinder the further psycho-spiritual growth of the family. In other words, the family may remain trapped in the actual we, with the ideal we appearing distant or unattainable.

An antidote for healing a disturbed intersubjective relationship is forgiveness—both seeking and granting it. Indeed, forgiveness serves as the key to "unblocking" the actual we, allowing the relationship to be renewed and enabling the family to continue its journey toward the ideal we.

5. Affective Maturity Within Catholic Family

Affective maturity is one of the most influential components of overall human development. As a part of existential maturity, it continues throughout life because there are always new challenges and situations that require re-interpretation, transformation and re-integration. This is so because life progresses on a continuum, moving from one stage to higher stages (Imoda 1998, pp. 89–99). Affective maturity is crucial for the dynamics of family life because the family is a dynamic system which develops through various phases, each characterized by role development and the interchange of roles within the family system (Carli et al. 2009; Manenti 2007, pp. 9–26; Nikić 2004, pp. 10–73).

In order to move forward and make good decisions for life in common, the partners must achieve a certain degree of affective maturity, i.e., the prevalence of flexibility over rigidity. Affective maturity within Christian Intersubjectivity entails that both partners are capable of connecting with their internal forces, and predominantly, are able to direct them toward chosen values. Specifically, this means that the partners need to be in contact with their emotions; feeling them, being aware of them, and understanding what motivates each of them to feel as they do.

The next step requires that the partners be able to distance themselves from their emotions and reflect on whether the expression of those emotions is in accordance with their chosen values, i.e., how their expression would affect the family relationship.

Thus, on the one hand, affective maturity means the ability of the partners to feel and experience their emotions within the couple's relationship. On the other hand, it involves the capacity to regulate or relinquish these emotions for the common good and for love when this is necessary. If we view this from the lens of the structure of the intersubjective field, we can say that affective maturity is manifested in the relationship between the actual we and the ideal we. This means there is not a great distance between the two poles, but at the same time, these two poles do not completely align. Metaphorically speaking, the ideal we is always one or two steps ahead of where the partners, and indeed the whole family, currently are. As soon as the couple reaches the first or the second step, new and deeper horizons open up before them. This is because development in self-transcendent values is spiral and constant. Growth in affective maturity includes developing and strengthening the following capacities: the capacity to love unselfishly, not only oneself but also the other/Other; the capacity to control instincts; the capacity to endure suffering, unpleasantness and sacrifice; having a mature and not infantile conscience; the capacity to express aggression in a controlled way; the capacity to face reality rather than resorting to escapism; and the capacity to integrate personal needs with couple and family values (Cantelmi and Barchiesi 2007; Jerotić 2004; Rulla 2003).

Even though affective maturity is crucial for Christian Intersubjectivity, it is not, according to Kernberg, the predictor of a good and lasting intersubjective relationship. Kernberg (1995) explains as follows: "Emotional maturity is thus no guarantee of nonconflictual

stability for the couple. A deep commitment to one person and the values and experiences of a life lived together will enrich and protect the stability of the relationship" (p. 72).

6. Psychodynamics of the Family

The family is the primary environment where the three fundamental components of personality development—needs, attitudes and values—are nurtured. A harmonious, integrated and healthy personality systematically and gradually develops within the family through the cultivation, adoption and practice of these components. The family is a unique and universal unit where experiences of fulfillment, success or failure and health or illness develop at psycho-physiological, psycho-social and spiritual–rational levels.

There are three levels of psychic life within the individual: psycho-physiological, psycho-social and spiritual–rational. These levels differ in function, follow diverse laws and possess irreducible properties. However, they do not operate as separate or disconnected parts in human behavior; rather, they are interconnected and recognizable, in which one level usually prevails over the other (Nuttin 1962, pp. 220–24).

The family, as a community, has specific goals and functions that can be described as follows: fostering unity and diversity, caring for children, developing affective attachments, forming and integrating identity, satisfying mutual needs, providing help and fulfillment, serving as a space for learning social skills, preparing members for social inclusion and developing sexual identity (Ackerman 1966, p. 62). This definition indicates that the family is not merely a place for survival, but also an environment that shapes the essential humanity of the person. Observing the family as a dynamic and evolving psycho-social system, we can see that its growth hinges on maintaining a balance between two extremes—togetherness and individuality, or connection and division. A successful or healthy family is one that achieves its goals and values and regulates its functions, and this balance is reflected in the overall health and well-being of its members.

The family develops through various stages; it cannot be static. A family either progresses in development or regresses. As a living organism, the family is characterized by inevitable tension between togetherness and individuality, and can sometimes be directed toward one extreme, leading to an unbalanced family system. When a family excessively emphasizes togetherness or unity, it can become possessive and protective, hindering the individual development of its members and depriving them of the opportunity to cultivate their own identities. Conversely, if a family focuses excessively on individualization, it can turn into a family of individualists where each person prioritizes his or her personal interests, careers or even their own personal and spiritual growth, ignoring the well-being of other family members. In such a family, it is even possible to prioritize personal growth in holiness without considering others and without encouraging other family members to live holy. This form of individualism can lead to the instrumentalization of family members, using them for personal achievement and interests. The family, as a psycho-social entity, can be examined through three models, corresponding to three levels of psychic life (Nuttin 1962):

1. The family as a place for satisfying the needs, or psycho-physiological level.
2. The family as a place for practicing socialization, or psycho-social level.
3. The family as a school of values and ideals, or spiritual-rational level.

The first two levels are essential and inevitable components of family life; however, they are not the ultimate goal of family growth. If a family were to remain solely as a place for satisfying the needs of its members and fostering their inclusion in social life, it would be an incomplete system in development, because it would lack the crucial role of educating humanity. Education for humanity integrates the psycho-physiological and psycho-social levels into a broader context grounded in natural and supernatural values.

Observing the family as an integral system that educates humanity can only be done from the perspective of a value system, within which identity is formed in a way that is open to growth and consciously seeks transcendence. Thus, the family forms identity, helping individuals develop the capacity to answer two existential questions: "Who am I?" and "Where do I want to go?"

According to Erikson, one of the main characteristics of a solid identity is self-formation in accordance with and consistent with a real value system (Hall et al. 1998; Erikson 1980, pp. 108–75). The opposite of a solid identity is identity diffusion, which is characterized by confusion about self-image, self-doubt, uncertainty about one's abilities, a lack of trust in others, unclear roles and inconsistency in the realization of natural values.

The family's task is to help and enable the acquisition and consolidation of a consistent sense of self, as well as to encourage the consistent self to reach for values and ideals. A healthy family proposes and adopts balanced values; lives in the tension between what is and what should become, and does not suppress family tensions but embraces them, using them for further growth.

Within the family, no one should live in a way that alienates them from themselves, meaning they should not give up their individuality for the sake of other members. A family that prevents children from developing their autonomy is pathological. A healthy family encourages and nurtures the identity of its members and does not consider them as "private property". A healthy family prepares its members for a "flight" outside the family nest, that is, for a journey that transcends the family itself.

6.1. Family—School for Spiritual Growth

We have seen that the family is the primary space for psycho-physiological, psycho-social and rational–spiritual growth and development. Unselfish self-giving is a need inherent in the nature of the family and is not only a privilege of the Christian family. Openness to transcendence is a natural human need and an ability that is immanent to humankind. In the family, the child learns and practices two types of transcendence: horizontal and vertical. The first, horizontal transcendence, implies "going beyond oneself" and transcending one's needs in order to meet another person and understand their psychological and spiritual essence. The child uses the parents as a model, imitating their actions and behaviors; that is, imitating their successful or unsuccessful transcendence.

When it comes to the transfer of spiritual values, as in the case of the transfer of other natural values, the psychological process of assimilation of the parental model and identification with that model takes place. Later, depending on favorable and unfavorable family and social incentives, the child internalizes and integrates spiritual values with the rest of the personality or rejects them. The family greatly influences the development of an individual's religious matrix, influences the formation of a true or false image of God and even influences their choice of vocation. Family relationships in which parents, by their example, "go beyond themselves" in order to encounter each other and their children, form the fertile ground on which the seeds of a vocation fall.

The model of parental and family relations, in which one moves away from the "self-centered" position to realize the greater and common good of a "we-centered" approach, is the most important model for the child because it teaches them to open up to another person; that is, to a transcendent reality. Therefore, we conclude that the family, by its very nature, is a school of socialization, but can also serve as a school of religious socialization. If the aforementioned parental models fail to achieve a mutual self-transcending relationship, the relationship itself can become instrumentalized—meaning the other is used for selfish goals.

The second type, vertical transcendence, refers to realizing a shared project with another person; that is, daring to work together to achieve jointly chosen values or goals.

When there is a lack of unity in pursuing chosen values, it is very easy for the family to become a place focused on satisfying individual needs, rather than transcending those needs for greater good and growth.

The significance of the Christian message for married and family life is specific in that it gives the Christian family clear guidelines and answers the questions: What should we do together? How should we do it? And why? Horizontal transcendence is actualized through conjugal and parental love that grows and develops, inspired by the evangelical leaven. Vertical transcendence is realized when the family fulfils its "sacred" task—the mutual consecration of its members and authentic living according to the model of the Holy Trinity. When discussing family spirituality, certain psychological prerequisites must be met to support spiritual growth. It is important to emphasize that the core of family spirituality lies in seeking the Kingdom of God, and responding to concrete and clear demands that life brings to the family's doorstep every day.

6.2. Vulnerabilities of Modern Family—Difficulties for Integral Growth and Development

In this section, a pervasive issue affecting many families is explored: the absence of a father figure. We aim to examine the consequences of lacking a father for spiritual growth and development. In the contemporary era, there have been significant changes in how families are perceived, particularly regarding a man's identity at two levels: intrapersonal (how a man perceives himself) and interpersonal (how he is perceived by his family and society). Regarding modern parenting in the scientific psycho-pedagogical literature, we often come across statistical data indicating that an increasing number of children are growing up without a father figure. Also, the phrase "paternal deprivation" (Volarević 2017, pp. 415–18; Vasta et al. 2005, p. 477; Čudina-Obradović and Obradović 2006, p. 264), either physical or emotional, is reaching "pandemic proportions". If a father is only physically present in the family but does not invest emotionally in his relationship with his child, this is referred to as "present absence". In such cases, a child may see the father nearby, but he remains emotionally distant, cold and preoccupied with other things, ignoring the child's needs and emotions. Pope Francis has often addressed the problems and challenges posed by the absence of a male figure and father in families. In his apostolic exhortations The Joy of the Gospel (2013) and The Joy of Love (2016), Pope Francis highlights the serious implications of the absence of a father figure and emphasizes that today's generations are growing up in a "fatherless society" (Papa Franjo 2016, n. 176). To understand the absent father syndrome or, more broadly, the crisis of masculinity, it is important to recognize the underlying issue, which is the crisis of manhood itself, marked by the disappearance of the father figure and the erosion of authority (Cheaib 2022, p. 69). As mentioned earlier, identity develops through various milestones that span a lifetime, each accompanied by a dialectic and dynamic of, on one hand, insecurity, fear and doubt, and on the other, taking risks and the determination to transcend oneself in terms of needs or values, despite the frustrations that accompany this self-transcendence. According to psychoanalyst E. Erikson, a person goes through eight developmental stages throughout life. At each of these stages, the person experiences specific developmental crises or turning points, which, if overcome, lead to further growth and development. If not, regression occurs. A crisis, from Erikson's point of view, is a moment when a person has the potential for either "progress" or "regress". The formative tension between these two poles, according to Erikson, supported by a nurturing environment and a secure base in early childhood, helps individuals navigate developmental milestones or crises, steering them toward building their identity (Crain 2014, pp. 290–300). In addition to the family environment, other factors such as educational systems, peer relationships and social influences affect identity formation (Marčinko et al. 2018). If fixation occurs at any

stage during early development, further identity formation may be blocked, compromised or weakened, potentially resulting in identity diffusion (Berk 2008, pp. 384–88). Fixation on certain stages of development can affect the shaping of the image of God, as well as living in faith, which will be further explored in the following chapters.

6.3. Psychogenesis of the Life of Faith: The Formative Role of the Mother

Considering the psychogenesis of the life of faith from a psychodynamic perspective, we see that the fundamental religious experience—which includes trust, openness to life and love—has its roots in the concrete experiences a child has in a positive affective relationship with their parents, most often with the mother. This is confirmed by numerous studies in the field of psychology, which show that an intense and positive affective relationship with the caregiver—typically the mother—is essential for the development of faith (Diana 2012, p. 43). A "good mother" is one who manages to show the child, through her entire being—with her body, smile, the way she holds the baby and how she speaks to him—that he is unconditionally accepted, loved and desired. In this way, the child can develop a healthy foundation, fostering a positive self-image, self-esteem and the ability to trust and believe. These basic elements are crucial in forming the idea of God. Developmental psychology explains that the mother, upon whom the child is dependent, leaves an indelible mark on the child's psychological life (Berk 2008). The relationship between mother and child is also decisive in shaping the child's representation of God. According to Winnicott, the mother's eyes and face serve as the first mirror in which the child is reflected. This experience of love, admiration, and the encounter between the two faces—the mother's and the child's—is of great importance for the child's later encounter with God in adulthood (Cucci 2009, p. 125).

In the first year of a child's life, an "affective drama" or the first psychological crisis takes place, which, according to Erikson, will be resolved by gaining trust or by developing distrust in oneself, the mother and the environment. A mother who cares, admires the child and satisfies their individual needs—both physiological and psychological—is the mother who will help the child adopt fundamental attitudes toward life, including religious life. Such a mother "births" a sense of trust in the child, and this sense of trust serves as the foundation for future relationships. In adulthood, individuals who have developed this sense of trust tend to believe that other people are available, loving and trustworthy. This attitude is often transferred to one's perception of God and the life of faith. This becomes particularly evident in adulthood among those who have had a deep and positive affective relationship with their mother—a secure attachment. When facing difficulties or intense life situations, even when overwhelmed by fear and uncertainty, they maintain a deep conviction that everything will ultimately turn out well. They have hope. Developing trust in oneself and in one's mother or parents helps a child to tolerate the frustrations that arise during the developmental stages and enables them to cope with the suffering that comes with growing up. The frustration and suffering that one learns to endure within a warm and safe environment are crucial for both psychological and spiritual development.

According to Erikson, a feeling of distrust arises if the mother does not take good care of the child or if she fails to provide the necessary love and warmth. As a result, the child may develop a belief that others cannot be trusted, become wary in relationships, and feel discomfort in the social environments, which can consequently lead to alienation and isolation. The entire spectrum of unpleasant emotional dynamics that a child experiences in an unfavorable relationship with a mother, who cannot fulfill their needs or contain the child's emotions and frustrations may manifest in adulthood as anxiety and/or depressive disorders. In more severe cases, this can lead to psychopathological conditions such as depression, paranoia and/or spiritual pathologies.

A positive resolution of a psychological crisis and the acquisition of a sense of trust, along with harmonious and consistent parenting practices, teach the child whom and what to trust or distrust, positively influencing the development of hope. The first year of life is crucial for the development of hope as a psychological construct, which later impacts a believer's ability to live out the theological virtue of hope—a gift rooted in faith. Hope, along with faith and love, moves, directs and gives meaning to the entire Christian life (cf. 1 Cor 13:13). A positive resolution of a psychological crisis in the first year of life allows for a greater range of movement and choice. This means that a person, in adulthood, can cope with unfulfilled hopes, let go of them when necessary, seek new paths and open themselves to other challenges, horizons and relationships that are in line with Christian reality. In contrast, a distorted resolution of this crisis can lead to idolatry, hero worship and the glorification of psychological and/or spiritual gurus, fostering a dependence on charismatic leaders who will guide and dictate both the psychological and spiritual aspects of the person's life. Such individuals may fall into addictive relationships or join communities that nurture an immature and often distorted spirituality, based on a false image of God. If a person's concept of God, shaped by affective experiences with their mother, differs significantly from the true image of God, this can cause an "affective storm", leading to anxiety, guilt and confusion, with negative consequences for religious life. However, when the positive affective experiences of primary relationships contribute to building a personal concept of God that aligns with the true image of God, then the psychological and spiritual integration of one's personality occurs (Bošnjaković and Smoljo-Dobrovoljski 2023, p. 314).

Based on over 15 years of personal experience in individual and group analytical psychotherapy, clinical practice confirms that trust is the first step in personality development. The basic trust that a person acquires in themselves and others, based on early relationships with their mother and family, often manifests as trust in a psychotherapist, spiritual director, other people and God's providence. In people seeking help for anxiety, depressive episodes or other psychological difficulties, in most cases, anamnestic data—obtained using clinical interviews and projective techniques—frequently reveal underlying distrust and insecurity in their early relationship with their mother.

Although, in clinical interviews, the majority of clients initially described their relationship with their mother as positive and seemingly good, a deeper exploration of relational dynamics often revealed an underlying distrust toward the mother. This distrust stemmed from a belief that the mother was unable to understand and accept the emotions they had as children, that her acceptance was conditional, and that she was incapable of containing their unpleasant emotions and experiences. Consequently, these individuals learned, already in infancy, to wear a mask, to defend themselves by hiding their real emotional state and presenting only what they believed their mother expected. From an early age, there was a discrepancy between what the child truly felt inside and what they outwardly presented to their mother and other family members. Such a dichotomy disrupted psychological and spiritual health and often led to many difficulties. A particularly interesting clinical observation, noticeable in psychotherapy with a significant number of clients, is as follows: individuals who had a problematic, conflictual, distant or cold relationship with their mother, when asked whether they felt more attached to Jesus Christ or the Blessed Virgin Mary, most often answered Jesus Christ. This dynamic is equally present in both men and women. Their perception of the Blessed Virgin Mary was shaped and influenced by their affective experiences with their own mother, making it incompatible with the true image of the Virgin Mary. However, after undergoing psychotherapy treatment, typically lasting two to three years, and in some cases up to five years, with weekly sessions, along with spiritual accompaniment, significant improvements were observed. Clients who have worked

through unpleasant and painful emotions, traumas and wounds related to their relationship with their mother, often encounter the Blessed Virgin Mary in a new light. They begin to feel her as closer and warmer, and pray to her more frequently. After processing these wounds through psychotherapy and spiritual guidance, the feeling of distrust in God, or the image that God is distant, cold and uninterested, changes significantly. In some cases, this distrust merely diminishes, while in others, trust in God and other people is fully regained. The results of such changes were evident in new attitudes: they accepted themselves and others, judged themselves less and had more compassion and empathy for themselves and others, and became more accepting and open to life's challenges, tensions and daily struggles, trusting in God's providence. Clinical experience leads to the conclusion that the relationship with one's mother is a significant factor that influences emotional, social and spiritual life, as well as one's image of God and experience of living in faith. However, reducing psychological and spiritual life solely to the mother–child relationship would be a dangerous determinism and a fatal reductionism of human nature. Working on one's inner self—both psychologically and spiritually—combined with an intense and engaged spiritual life, can lead to new experiences and new affective relationships, which can have a positive impact on the purification of the image of God and maturation in faith, despite painful experiences in the relationship with the mother and/or other family members.

6.4. The Formative Role of Father

From an anthropological perspective, the human person is characterized by limitations: one has the capacity to open up and experience the fullness of love, but also faces a constant temptation to retreat into a limited perspective focused on small personal pleasures and egoism (Second Vatican Council 1965, n. 10; Wojtyla 1982, p. 38). Within this limited reality, a man must learn to direct his needs and emotions in order to live his humanity in consistency with his spiritual mission as husband and father. The strength of integrated needs and emotions often is manifested in communication: the way a father communicates within the family can reveal whether his emotional level is consistent with the values of married family life. A man who has difficulty recognizing, accepting and channeling feelings such as frustration, anger or other unpleasant emotions in a mature way (Brackett 2021, pp. 79–153) tends to avoid the tension which is inherent to marriage and parenthood (Juul 2018, p. 142).

Difficulties in the development of a marital and parental relationship arise when a man uses the marital union to strengthen his fragile and vulnerable self (Bissi 2016, pp. 7–55). Furthermore, the problem within the family deepens if the father, instead of "protecting and supporting his wife and children" (Papa Franjo 2016, n. 55), primarily seeks an affective and secure base for himself, avoiding marital and parental duties and responsibilities. This form of "infantilism" hinders a man from fulfilling his sacred mission and task. "Are you married? Be holy by loving and caring [. . .] as Christ does for the Church" (Papa Franjo 2020, n. 14). Pope Francis also emphasizes that the path to holiness involves taking small steps every day and patiently teaching children how to follow Jesus. This leads us to another crucial aspect of fatherhood: nurturing children for a healthy spiritual life. The father, by his example and encouragement, creates a fertile ground within the family that enables the child to come to know God as a Father (Szentmártoni 1999, pp. 239–50).

The Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches that "the union of man and woman becomes subject to tensions" (n. 400) and that "the way of perfection passes by way of the Cross. There is no holiness without renunciation and spiritual battle" (n. 2015). Those who avoid facing unpleasant and painful emotions may escape into the virtual world, excessive work or fantasy, seeking to gratify their unfulfilled desires. Over time, this can lead to addictions, which may be compensatory or pathological. By avoiding contact with inner

dynamics such as vulnerability, conflicts and responsibilities, a man weakens his identity and undermines his vocation. A man in his vocation of husband and father is called to be present, to "share everything, joys and sorrows, efforts and hopes with his wife. He must also stay close to his children as they grow: when they play, when they fulfill their responsibilities, when they are carefree, and when they experience anxiety. He should be there when they speak and when they are silent, when they dare to try something new and when they feel afraid, when they stumble and when they find their way again. A father is present, always. However, being present does not mean controlling them. Fathers who tend to be overly controlling can restrain their children, and in such a way, they do not allow them to grow" (Papa Franjo 2017, p. 25). The imperative to be a father is inherent in a man's psyche (Szentmártoni 2017, p. 414), and fatherhood can be biological and/or spiritual. Therefore, it follows that the figure of the father is important for the psychological, social, moral and spiritual development of the child. A father should patiently set boundaries for the child that will support them in life; he is neither "permissive nor sentimental" (Papa Franjo 2017, p. 26). Like St. Joseph, the father should be a guardian and mediator of faith in goodness, justice and God's protection (p. 27).

In 2022, an international research study titled "Psychological and Pedagogical Analysis of the Self-Perception of the Identity and the Role of Man" was conducted by Sanda Smoljo-Dobrovoljski and Sandra Bjelan, involving 194 men and/or fathers (Smoljo-Dobrovoljski and Bjelan 2023, pp. 113–28). The findings revealed that 69.6% of the respondents perceived themselves as permissive toward their children, and the majority of the respondents reported having difficulties in setting and maintaining boundaries with them. For a child to be successfully socialized, both parents should be involved and present in the child's development, in order to teach the child that life includes boundaries and sacrifices (Cloud and Townsend 2019). The dangers of a permissive parenting style have negative consequences for child development. Children raised under permissive parenting often exhibit impulsive and aggressive behavior, especially boys, and tend to have low levels of self-control (Pašalić Kreso 2012, p. 240). A person who cannot say "no" may provoke feelings of dissatisfaction, chaos and frustration in others (Kernberg 1999, pp. 157–58). According to international research (Smoljo-Dobrovoljski and Bjelan 2023), a significant percentage of 37.1% indicated that the father neglected the spiritual upbringing of the children. The permissive parenting style, combined with neglected religious and spiritual education, can negatively influence the formation of a child's image of God and their perception, interpretation and practice of the religious dimension.

A father who shows empathy and compassion toward his child provokes admiration in him and a desire to be like his father—strong and protective. Such a father, who creates and cultivates a secure base and secure attachment, helps the child, through the biological father, encounter God as the compassionate Father. The compassionate Father, when the child makes mistakes, offers consolation, and after committing a sin, He waits for the son's return and accepts him with open arms, rather than responding with judgement, punishment or abandonment (Bošnjaković and Smoljo-Dobrovoljski 2023, p. 110).

6.5. True and False Images of God

Considering the aforementioned research and statistical data, the question arises: Do family dynamics influence the creation of an image of God and growth in faith? From what is outlined above, we can conclude that an immature family environment, the presence of certain psychopathologies and toxic relationships within family dynamics can impact the formation of the image of God and life in faith. However, this is by no means deterministic. The image of God is not only a projection of the image of the mother or father, although they can significantly influence and shape both the image of God and the living in faith.

When negative experiences and relationships dominate the family, and when living in faith is marked by rigidity or scrupulosity, this can influence the representation of God (Ana-María Rizzuto 2006, pp. 10–30). Based on such experiences with parents, a person may, later in adulthood, have intellectual knowledge about God from the Bible or religious education, but also experience an opposite affective perception of God. In this sense, there is a discrepancy between intellectual knowledge and affective experience (Diana 2012). From the previously mentioned research, where it was found that 69.6% of fathers have difficulty setting and maintaining boundaries, it seems that this may partly help explain why young people show less respect for authority, are more impulsive and have relationships characterized by persistent instability, centered on seeking immediate gratification. The renunciation, sacrifice and delay of immediate pleasures are increasingly being avoided.

What will happen to future generations raised by permissive or absent fathers, who tend to close themselves off in an immanent reality, escaping from self-transcendence in daily life? One of the potential difficulties for religious development is if such generations subordinate religiosity and God to their own needs, seeking God as a transitional object (Ana-María Rizzuto 2006) for psychological consolation or as a substitute attachment figure. Furthermore, a danger to growth and development arises if religion acquires a "consumer" code and becomes just another antidote to current problems or develops into "spiritual tourism", offering occasional relief and escape from everyday life. The image of God, as we explained earlier, is not solely determined by the relationship with the mother and father, but to a large extent, the experiences with the earthly mother and father shape it, though they are not its foundation. Faith is a gift; one cannot create God but reveal Him in oneself (Szentmártoni 1999). As Saint Augustine described in his Confessions, he sought God outside himself but discovered that He was within him. A compassionate and empathetic parent who raises a child with patience can foster a positive image of God, helping the child to perceive God as good, comforting and a secure base. In contrast, a child who experiences abuse or neglect may experience mistrust, contempt and even anger toward God (Nikić 2011). In families where permissive parenting dominates, there is often a lack of structure, boundaries, rules and clarity, which can also manifest in inconsistency in prayer and spiritual life.

When there are no boundaries, structure or rules in the family, the dangerous extreme is that the family's daily functioning may become guided and directed by the emotional states of the parents and other members. As Brackett (2021) affirms, emotions should be filtered by reason and values. In a Catholic family, emotions should be integrated with Gospel values. The permissive patterns can also be reflected in the religious life. This means that, when the family is in a positive mood, they pray, or, in some families, the opposite occurs: when problems arise, the family prays, but when there are no problems or conflicts, daily religious and prayer life is neglected. Such a way of living in faith demonstrates immature forms, indicating that faith is conditioned by emotional states. A child raised in such family circumstances may develop a permissive attitude toward faith, living it in an emotionally driven manner. This often manifests in adulthood as seeking God only in times of difficulty, fear or anxiety, and afterwards once the emotional storm has passed and the challenge has been overcome, religious life is neglected and set aside. This inconsistency weakens faith, hope and Christian love.

According to psychoanalytic theory, individuals who remain fixated on the oral stage of development (which lasts until 18 months of age) often have an image of an omnipotent God who will resolve all their problems. These individuals tend to be passive, waiting for a miracle to come from outside. If God does not solve their problems, they might conclude that God does not love them. They reason: "If He truly loved me, He would intervene". This leads them to question their own worthiness, wondering if they deserve to be loved,

and to feel that something is inherently wrong with them. Among depressed personalities, there are believers whose faith, hope and love are weak. It is clear that in such persons, the depressive structure also affects the image of God, the living in faith and their dialogue with God in prayer (Dedić 2021, p. 295). In dialogue with God through prayer, a person brings their own personality and structure, engaging in the relationship according to the relational matrix or "mother tongue" learned in early developmental stages with primary figures (Ban et al. 2010). Additionally, emotionally unstable individuals, who may be described as experiencing persistent instability, often dramatize and exaggerate their sins. They may experience God as a loving and forgiving father, eagerly seeking special miracles and gifts from Him. However, during episodes of emotional instability or depression, they can shift to seeing God as distant, reserved and cold, feeling deprived of His love and mercy. Individuals who are fixed in the anal phase of development, which occurs between the 18th month and the 3rd year of life, may perceive God as a strict judge. Those who are inclined toward moralizing and strict adherence to rules often live in their faith missing the joy and fulfillment. They also doubt God's mercy and love (Dedić 2021, p. 296).

6.6. Accompaniment and Religious Education

Italian psychotherapist Anna Bissi (2016), in her work *Guarire il cuore*, emphasizes that the first step toward achieving spiritual health and maturation begins with learning to look into one's inner psychic life with compassion and caring. Often, the inner world is neglected and left aside. Healing begins with compassionate love (Bošnjaković and Smoljo-Dobrovoljski 2023). It is necessary to start from the heart, from the inner life, because the path of transformation begins there. The heart is the place where God resides and through which He communicates.

Bissi identifies several emotional wounds that a person experiences within the family and throughout development, which require particular attention and healing. Among these wounds are distrust, failure, narcissism, indifference, impatience, pride, intolerance and ingratitude. These are diseases of the soul and spirit (Bissi 2016), and as such, they can negatively influence the relationships with others, as well as the image of God and the living of faith. To heal these wounds, accompaniment and religious education are necessary, often at two levels: psychological and spiritual. Individuals who experience God on an affective level, contrary to the biblical image of God as the Merciful Father, are the new poor and fragile, who need to be accompanied (Papa Franjo 2013, n. 210) and helped on their path of growth and development. Pope Francis emphasizes the importance of personal accompaniment in growth processes with the following words: "The Church will have to initiate everyone—priests, religious and laity—into this 'art of accompaniment' which teaches us to remove our sandals before the sacred ground of the other (cf. Ex 3: 5). The pace of this accompaniment must be steady and reassuring, reflecting our closeness and our compassionate gaze which also heals, liberates and encourages growth in the Christian life" (Papa Franjo 2013, n. 169).

A person at a certain stage of spiritual and/or psychological accompaniment may often feel great anger and rage toward God, express criticisms and cry as to why He has permitted injustice, pain, suffering and evil in their life. This usually occurs in the initial phase of working on and purifying the image of God and growing in faith. Many difficult family situations, tense relationships and traumas should be openly expressed and worked through in a safe and compassionate environment. After emotional processing and overcoming trauma, a healthy, new attitude should be developed toward the past, the people who hurt them, and the trauma should be "archived". In this process, forgiveness is crucial and must happen at two levels: intrapsychic and interpersonal. When the wound is healed, a scar remains, which carries with it a new experience, maturity and

wisdom. However, in order to purify the image of God, one must go through the mourning process (Urlić et al. 2014). This means first recognizing the emotional movements within oneself, then accepting oneself (Philippe 2019) and one's uncomfortable emotions, pain and suffering, verbalizing and working through the emotions, fantasies and images that have influenced perception and shaped a distorted image of God and living one's faith. When accompanying people today, an interdisciplinary approach is needed: one that is both psychological and spiritual. This approach requires understanding natural laws and the phases of psychological development, and respects the natural processes that must take place in order to purify distorted projections, affective inclinations and ideas in order to open up to knowing the true image of God and the path to mature faith. In this process of accompaniment and education, two important elements that lead to affective maturation must occur: emotional insight and emotional correction. As a third element, the outcome of this process of maturation is a new way of thinking and a new attitude toward reality.

A person to whom the biblical image of God is revealed through religious education, along with a new emotional experience with a person of accompaniment (priest, educator, therapist), can develop a new relationship with God on an affective level as well. We are not determined solely by the affective relationships with primary figures. Relationships built on new experiences and affective dimensions can transform relational patterns and reshape the affective relation to God (Ana-María Rizzuto 2006): from God as a strict judge to a Merciful God, from ritualistic and legalistic faith to the inner freedom of being a Child of God, and from false humility to true humility. In this process of growth and maturation, the focus is on theocentric self-transcendence, not on self-realization. Theocentric self-transcendence occurs when a person strives to reach communion with God and to communicate with Him in such a way that the person accepts and fulfils the will of God, i.e., when a person surrenders and relies on God in all aspects of their life (Rulla 1986). This also means that growth in faith helps a person to go beyond themselves, i.e., transcend everything that they are—what they think, feel, desire and achieve—in order to focus on their current situation and reach God as the ultimate goal. By transcending themselves to enter into communion and unity with God, one realizes their true identity as a person.

7. Materials and Methods

The aim of this research was to analyze how contemporary family dynamics in Catholic families can affect the attachment between parent and child, and furthermore, how children's perceptions of their parents relate to their perceptions of God. The intention is also to recognize the consequences of certain images of God on religious development. Does God become a "substitute attachment figure", when one parent is absent from the family, and if it happens, how can religious education help the person mature their faith and relationship with God, moving beyond infantile attachment?

The theoretical assumption is that the quality of the relationship between parent and child affects the creation of the image of God; that is, the perception of God and the mature and immature living of faith. Based on the teaching of the Catholic Church, we hold that the person does not create God. God is not a human projection, but rather, the person discovers God as He reveals Himself to the person. Although the image of God is not ultimately determined solely by the parent–child relationship, this relationship can still have significant influence and can either foster or block the mature living of faith. In order to investigate this issue, we began with an analysis of Church documents and teachings on marriage and family, followed by an analysis of international studies that examine the parent–child relationship and the influence of parenting on the formation of personality and religious life. In particular, we analyzed the recent international research (Smoljo-

Dobrovoljski and Bjelan 2023) in order to identify the implications of permissive parenting on the perception and image of God and the living of faith.

8. Conclusions

In this paper, we explored how family dynamics impact the image of God and the maturation of faith. In the first part of the paper, we presented the teaching of the Church on marriage and family, as well as the fundamental components crucial for the healthy development of children within a Catholic family. In the second part, we explored the growing vulnerabilities of contemporary families; particularly, the absence of fathers, either physically or emotionally, and the consequences this has on the children's psychological and spiritual development. We also explored the role of the mother in psychogenesis of the life of faith.

After analyzing recent studies on the relationship between parents and children, especially the importance of the father in both psychological and spiritual growth and development, we conclude that family dynamics can influence the creation of the image of God and the maturation of faith. Research shows that a significant number of men are experiencing a crisis of identity, and the consequences of this crisis can affect children's upbringing on both psychological and spiritual levels. The crisis of psychological and spiritual formation of children reflects the crisis of formative figures (Cucci 2012). In families where boundaries and clear hierarchical order are absent, parents become less effective role models for identification (Rekalkati 2014).

However, this does not mean that the relationship with parents determines the image of God or the way one lives in their faith. A person does not create God but reveals Him. Faith is a gift. While family dynamics influence and shape a person's perception, later experiences, self-work, accompaniment and religious education can help purify projections, i.e., negative affective patterns formed through relationships with parents, that may have been projected onto the image of God and the practice of living in faith. Working on oneself fosters growth from infantile to mature faith, leading to an authentic relationship with God. In order to help contemporary families, particularly in addressing the crisis of men and fatherhood, it is essential to accompany them, strengthening their identity and their sacred mission as husbands and fathers.

Therefore, the family, as the heart of the New Evangelization, may become less effective and limited in its evangelical mission due to Christian "mediocrity". Today, all Catholics, especially Catholic families, are invited to be "protagonists of the New Evangelization" (John Paul II 1981, n. 52). Pope Paul VI affirms, "the family, like the Church, ought to be a place where the Gospel is transmitted and from which the Gospel radiates. In a family which is conscious of this mission, all the members evangelize and are evangelized. The parents not only communicate the Gospel to their children, but from their children they can themselves receive the same Gospel as deeply lived by them. And such a family becomes the evangelizer of many other families, and of the neighborhood of which it forms part" (Paul VI 1975, n. 71).

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Data Availability Statement: No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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