



St. Francis House: Mentoring Young Men in a Fatherless Society

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The centrality of a father or male mentor in the life of a young man is discussed by the director of St. Francis House, in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, New York. A brief description of this home for boys 18 years and older who have come from extremely difficult situations is followed by reflections on the importance of men's personal commitment to boys, in particular the combination of a male model for young men's spiritual life.

Key Words: mentoring, boys, men, fathers, male adolescence, spirituality in males

Editor's Introduction: In 1967 Father Benedict Groeschel, of the Franciscan Friars of the Renewal, founded the St. Francis House in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, New York City, in order to provide a safe haven and highly structured home environment designed to meet the needs of young men, ages 18 and up, who having run out of alternatives and are looking for a new start in life. Life in St. Francis House breaks the cycle of poverty that traps youth into thinking they have no hope for the future. The goal of the St. Francis House is to provide a loving environment to build the self-confidence, social and working skills young men can take into the world to become productive, caring and responsible adults.

Every young man is required to go to work, school, or both, and to maintain responsible attitudes and behavior and share in the maintenance of the house, rotating chores on a monthly basis. Domestic skills, including cooking and cleaning for themselves and the house are learned and performed by each resident. Many members of the St. Francis House now help to run an emerging independent film company known as Grassroots Films. These young men learn valuable business, artistic, and organizational skills that have propelled the company towards high profile projects including a recent film commissioned by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.

Several young men have written about their experience at St. Francis House. One young man explained: "an oasis in Brooklyn, New York exists! The St. Francis House and the St. Joseph Residence in Greenpoint, Brooklyn are places of safety, comfort, values, discipline and faith, places where you can find refuge in a dark world, and shelter in a time of need. Many young men have come and gone here over the years and I was fortunate to have spent two years of my life there from 1996-1998. In those years I had a lot of ideas about life, opinions about how I fit in and questions about my purpose. Like many others, I could always stand to learn a thing or two, and it was at the St. Francis House where I really saw God's hand at work every day in my life and in the lives of my roommates, young men working hard to move in a direction of healing, success, purpose, and redemption. The relationships I made back then are still valid today and even more meaningful. As the years have gone by, as we grow older, I have seen these men growing in their faith. I have seen a maturity, a solid grounding for them that could only come from one source. I am truly grateful to Father Benedict, Joe Campo, the Franciscans, my old roommates whom I call brothers and all the generous people who help this oasis continue to thrive. It has never been more relevant and in need. It provides a home to the homeless and ultimately hope to the hopeless."

Another resident had an unmanageable life, was addicted to drugs and alcohol. When he was twenty he had just gotten out of rehab. Basically, his options were to go to jail or die. But he found another option. He moved into the St. Francis House eight years ago. He started working with computers and web design with the Friars and even went to college. His life made a complete turnaround. Motivated to build his future, he enrolled in a four-year college. After he earned his B.A. in social work, he became a substance abuse counselor for youth struggling with the same problems he had overcome. During his time at the house, he fell in love with a wonderful young woman and they were married. Quite possibly voted 'least likely to succeed' by the world, he took complete control of his life. He and his wife now live in Rhode Island where they have bought their second home and are expecting their third child. His devotion to God, his wife and his children makes him a perfect

example of what life is really about and what the St. Francis House has to offer.”

Yet another young man recalled: “Growing up, I came from a very poor ghetto area.” He was born in 1986 in Jackson Heights, Queens, New York. His mother was a medical assistant but his father was unemployed and often wasted scarce family money on gambling. He has been connected to the St. Francis House for many years because his older brother also lives here. Over the years, Jeff became a member of the house and eventually moved in. He now has a life of consistency. He said: “I don’t always have to worry about whether or not my brothers and I would be physically abused that night.” Feeling safe and much more confident, he has finished high school, excelling in the math and the sciences. “It’s the first time in my life I’ve had my own room.” He is a member of the Youth 2000 NY crew and works as a production management assistant for Grassroots Films. Jeff has been developing his computer skills and also enjoys acting.

The middle child from a family of three, another resident came from a home with a father suffering from alcoholism, and a devout mother. By the age of thirteen he was skipping school, in and out of jail, and doing drugs. After a brief sentence in Riker’s Island prison, he was introduced to Joe Campo and agreed to stay at the St. Francis House. In the two years he lived at the house, he matured enormously. He has since received his GED, moved into his own apartment, and will be starting college studying criminal justice. “This house has given me a lot opportunities in life, and given me both boundaries and freedom,” he says. “It offered me a second chance in life; if it wasn’t for this house I’d probably be in and out of prison for the rest of my life.”

Important thoughts about experiences at this remarkable “oasis” in the heart of New York City! Recently, Joseph Campo, Director of St. Francis House, joined the Communities Advisory Board of *New Male Studies*. We asked him to comment briefly on his experience as a mentor to young men, about the importance of older men in the lives of boys and young men. What follows are his observations. We thank Joe for taking time from a very busy schedule to put together the following reflections.

Reflections on Working with Young Men

The St. Francis House, in Brooklyn, New York, is a home for young men who have run out of other alternatives in their lives. It was founded in 1967 by Fr. Benedict Groeschel, who was chaplain at the Children’s Village in Dobbs Ferry, New York. In the 1960’s, a youth who was awarded to the state would stay at the Village but was then released on his 17th birthday. Bobby and Jimmy, two brothers whom Fr. Benedict ministered to, were about to be released. They were from Greenpoint, Brooklyn, a Polish neighborhood, and their first language was Polish. Fr. Benedict immediately began to scope out the neighborhood looking for a place for these two boys when he came across a dilapidated house that had a sign outside that read “The St. Francis Club.” It was obvious by the condition of the building that no one had lived there for some time. Fr. Benedict went to the rectory, spoke with the local priest, and it wasn’t too long after that the sign outside now read “The St. Francis House for Boys.” The club members were generous and donated the home. The house ran for over 20 years helping out hundreds of young teens.

I arrived on the scene in 1992, since Fr. Benedict was thinking of closing down the home. He was extremely busy with the friars, writing books, preaching all over the world and doing everything a priest has to do on a daily basis. He couldn't find anyone to take on the responsibility to run the house. Another friar suggested to Fr. Benedict that he speak to me about the possibility of taking charge of the house. For me, it was a dream-come-true. It had been my heart's desire to work and help the poor for most of my life and after experiencing a spiritual awakening in 1988, I knew that I was now going to be fulfilled.

I moved to Brooklyn from the suburbs where I had lived comfortably for most of my life. I never grew up poor, but from my earliest memories, I had a soft spot in my heart for the underprivileged. I was even thinking of moving to a less-developed country to fulfill my dreams there. I would teach people to become independent by growing their own crops and whatever else I could do to help and of course get a chance to learn a new language. I realized this move was going to be a shock, going from comfort into cramped city life.

My vision was to change it from just simply a house to a "home." The day I moved to The St. Francis House it became my home. I've been mentoring the young men there for well over 20 years. I never took a penny from the government for myself or for the home. It has all run from private donations. Most important, I think, the reason for the home's success is because it is Christ-centered and nothing less. Grace is said before every meal and before every group meeting. Everyone attends church and we go together as a family.

I must admit I feel that I received more than I have given. Working with the young men who have lived here has offered me a life that I never expected. I'm the father of two sons of my own. I always wanted to have ten children; God gave me 15! That may not sound fashionable, but to be frank, I've never been fashionable. I believe that all children are a blessing.

I've often heard that you can't love someone until you love yourself first. I think that is one of the most ridiculous statements I've ever heard about the human condition. You don't learn anything through just yourself; you learn from experiences through others, especially about loving. A rule at the St. Francis House is to live the second commandment. If you can live the second commandment, you will find happiness and joy because you are living and sacrificing for others. It is an unselfish way of life. Men have been living and sacrificing for others (wives, children, and family) since the beginning of time. It is through love that a man understands what it is to be a true man.

There are many reasons why a young man would come to the home and not everyone who comes to the home comes for only one reason. Some come for economic reasons, others have been involved with drugs and alcohol, while others are homeless. But the one thing that each one of them has in common is that there was no father in his life. Either his father left when the boy was very young or the boy has no memories of his father.

Some have nothing but negative memories, suffered abuse, and want to forget their fathers. Still others have never met their fathers. In any case, they all went through abandonment. This abandonment produces confusion, loneliness, and an identity crisis to name just a few issues. I am not a

psychologist or psychiatrist, but I've spent enough time with these young men and they have told me of these issues themselves.

While a single mother can be a great parent, she can't take on the role of a father. It's not uncommon for a mother to tell me she is both the father and mother in her son's life. Big mistake! A mother is the most important person in the child's life and she most likely does the work of both parents, so I can understand why some mothers would say that. But when it comes to masculinity, self-awareness, identity and self-worth, a young boy needs a father as an example. He needs someone to identify with and emulate and act as a guide to help him mature into manhood. Masculinity is best taught by the masculine.

While taking a class about counseling many years ago, it was taught by a woman who also stated that men and women are equal in every way. I politely raised my hand to disagree. She asked me to explain what my thoughts were. I used the example of young children playing together. I observed that while girls communicate, boys compete. We were made different and thank God for that; we complete each other. As an example, I also mentioned that although she was naturally taller and weighed more than me, I was physically stronger than her and if she was up to it I would be happy to have a contest to see who could bench press more weight! The contest never took place but I did get a very positive reaction from the class.

Unfortunately, we live in a fatherless society. Often boys who come into St. Francis House learned what it means to be a man from a woman. Because of this, they lack courage. In order for a boy to transition naturally into manhood, he needs a positive male role model. Going through adolescence is difficult enough and even more confusing for a young man who does not have a man as his mentor or teacher. Anyone knows that boys become men by naturally looking to their fathers as examples. The father has feelings and full knowledge of what the boy is going through, since he went through adolescence himself. Boys need guidance to understanding how to think and feel like a man and how to problem solve like a man.

I find that everyone is searching for an identity, a positive example to follow, and when they don't get the answers they need, boys and young men can become desperate. They will try things without guidance and sometimes they spiral into a state of confusion. They are searching for their identity, a sense of belonging, safety, and mostly, they want to be heard. Most of the boys who show up at St. Francis House have no idea of what family life is all about and, already broken, feel unloved and are depressed.

I have the ability and desire to listen and work on understanding each boy's situation on a personal basis. I do not judge. The responsibility of the father or male role model is to be a guide, except with a certain amount of discipline. Balance is the key. A single-parent home leaves little room for that balance. The greatest lesson I learned is that boys want to be treated like boys. They don't mind a gentle slap on the back of the head (an Italian love tap) when they need to be corrected. I have had more young people thank me for that than society would want you to believe! Boys like to climb on the furniture and they don't mind running through the bushes to reach their destination. The young men who come here are adventurous. If they don't have an adventure they will create one.

I've witnessed this hundreds of times over a 20-year period.

I recently had a young man come to me seeking advice. I asked him if he would like to take a walk to the store while talking. This young man never had a relationship with his father. He grew up in the projects in Brooklyn, New York, and still lives there with his mother and sister. Everything he learned about manhood (or didn't learn) he got from them. I noticed out of the corner of my eye he was watching how I walked. He then imitated my style of walking. My heart dropped because I realized he was starving for an example of manhood in his life. He wanted to walk like a man. So the best he could do that day to feel like a man was to walk like me. He is a good person with a good heart but with no direction into manhood, and at the moment I'm the only positive male role model in his life.

It's only natural for a young man to be taught by his dad. Men learn to be men by being around men. The natural way for a young man to grow is to imitate his father. The young imitate what they see. The St. Francis House provides a mentoring program that helps to build confidence so that young men do not have to be afraid to grow into maturity. The setting is no different than the way I grew up. There were rules and everyone knew what they were. There were also responsibilities, chores, love, a sense of belonging to the family, and everyone was important.

Above all, the young man has a responsibility and that should be made clear to him. It is for them to know what is expected of them and to have a willingness to learn, trust, and a desire to change into what is expected of him. And when those responsibilities are placed in front of him, with a positive example to follow, he will more often than not step up to the plate.



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