

Spiritual Mothers Pray for Priests

A look at the Spiritual Motherhood Sodality and other similar groups

by Joseph Pronechen, Staff Writer

Saturday, May 03, 2014 8:54 AM

St. John Paul II dedicated his papacy to the Blessed Mother, calling her a "superior model" for the Church in a 1997 general audience.

Mary is also the model for all mothers; among Mary's titles are Our Lady of Prompt Succor and Our Lady of Perpetual Help. More than ever in today's world, spiritual mothers are needed, especially for priests, to follow the Blessed Mother's lead.

"Given the contemporary circumstances, there are many things to do on behalf of the true good of the clergy and for the fecundity of pastoral ministry," Cardinal Mauro Piacenza, former prefect for the Congregation of the Clergy at the Vatican, told the Register. "It is because there is much to do that there is an urgency, before all else, for prayer."

In 2007, the congregation released *Eucharistic Adoration for the Sanctification of Priests and Spiritual Maternity* around the world, asking for spiritual motherhood for priests.

With the second edition (2013) available from Roman Catholic Books in Fort Collins, Colo., women are heeding the call through the Spiritual Motherhood Sodality and other similar groups.

Father of Mercy Joseph Aytona established the Spiritual Motherhood Sodality in September 2013, after reading this document, talking with religious sisters, getting requests from women and studying John Paul II's writings, like his "Letter to Women" and especially his apostolic letter *Mulieris Dignitatem* (The Dignity and Vocation of Women), which speaks of maternity according to the spirit.

Based in Rancho Cucamonga, Calif., this nationwide initiative (SpiritualMaternity.org) already has more than 500 women praying for 500 priests. Father Aytona's vision is to have three spiritual mothers for every priest in America.

Many help Father Aytona, who was a guest on *EWTN Live* on Feb. 19, to explain and promote spiritual maternity. One example is the video [YouTube.com/SpiritualMaternity](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=...), which features EWTN chaplain Father Joseph Wolfe of the Franciscan Missionaries of the Eternal Word, Sister Marie Emmanuel of the Poor Clares of Perpetual Adoration and Sister Anne Catherine from the Dominican Sisters of St. Cecilia.

While the Church calls every member to pray for priests, what distinguishes spiritual motherhood is that women imitate the Blessed Virgin Mary. According to Father Aytona, women do that by spiritually adopting a priest who, the Church teaches, is an *alter Christus* (another Jesus).

No matter her age or state in life, any woman can be a spiritual mother, which is not a vocation in itself, explained Father Aytona. Young or old, married, single or a religious, a woman can incorporate spiritual maternity into her daily life.

"Every woman thus can become a spiritual mother for priests, with love, prayer, work, joy, suffering, with heartfelt ecclesial awareness," according to Cardinal Piacenza.

"Spiritual motherhood has to do with doing God's will," Father Aytona added.

Praying within the Mass is one of the ways spiritual maternity can bear much fruit for priests. So can offering up holy Communion and praying before the Blessed Sacrament.

As Father Aytona explained, "The reality of motherhood is helping people get to heaven; that's the true essence of motherhood. So spiritual motherhood is nurturing Divine life in others as you share in Mary's spiritual motherhood."

Indeed, St. John Paul II made that clear in *Redemptoris Mater* (On the Blessed Virgin Mary in the Life of the Pilgrim Church): "being a mother constitutes more than simply caring for 'bodily needs,' but should also be concerned for the salvation and moral life of children ... and spiritual life directed toward heaven. This type of maternity can be described as spiritual motherhood."

Nurturing this Divine life "should first and foremost be done for a priest because he is the primary instrument that gives us grace through the sacraments," Father Aytona said.

Ultimately, through spiritual maternity, the Church benefits.

Father Gary Selin, formation adviser and professor of theology at St. John Vianney Theological Seminary in the Denver Archdiocese, points out that St. John Vianney, the patron of parish priests, said that when the ministerial priest is strong, many souls are saved. "He's basically saying when the spiritual mothers are praying for the sanctification of priests, they're benefitting the whole body of Christ," Father Selin said.

In 2008, Father Selin became aware of the spiritual-maternity document from the Congregation of the Clergy. Around that time, several women were interested in

gathering on a regular basis to pray for priests. Thus began a group for spiritual motherhood in Denver.

The spiritual mothers praying for priests in the archdiocese now number more than 25 women.

Father Selin says that women are called to this ministry: "The Holy Spirit will call those whom he wishes in this group. People approach me."

One spiritual mother in Denver is Mary Borda, archdiocesan coordinator for the diaconate. The difficult issues of the day "demand courageous witness and fidelity to the teachings of the Church," she said. "I see prayer and sacrifice to be crucial to supporting our priests in the midst of this challenging environment."

Father Selin points out that, although this work is "hidden," it "has an enormously powerful influence in nurturing spiritual life in priests, as well as awakening many holy vocations to the priesthood."

That's because spiritual mothers are following in the footsteps of Mary, the Mother of Priests.

Mary's spiritual motherhood in the order of grace started at the Annunciation, with her Fiat — her Yes to God's will; it then continued at the foot of the cross, when Jesus entrusted her to St. John the Apostle, explains the Second Vatican Council's dogmatic constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*.

For Father Selin, one of the most beautiful images of spiritual motherhood is Mary standing at the cross with St. John.

"In the rich Catholic tradition, St. John is the symbol of priests. So there is a special relationship established by Christ to Mary, Mother of all priests, and St. John, the apostle-priest."

Particularly when a priest offers Mass, Our Lady is by his side, added Father Selin.

"The spiritual mother, on her part, stands with Mary at the side of the priest to give him support," he explained. "Spiritual motherhood has a Marian dimension in the Church."

Although the Spiritual Mothers Sodality allows women to adopt their own priest if they so choose, most often, women do not want to know the identity of their adopted priest, which comes from a national list. Sodality mothers only get the priest's first name and no other details.

In Denver, Borda said that the vicar for clergy keeps the identities of the priests anonymous but gives spiritual mothers a specific prayer intention for a particular priest.

"The idea is to particularly support this priest throughout his life, praying for a particular virtue for him and offering little sacrifices for his intentions," she said. This does not exclude praying for other priests too, but "the center of our efforts is our `priest-son.'"

Some Denver spiritual mothers opt to pray for all priests or certain priests they feel need particular prayers at certain times. They also pray for seminarians and new vocations.

As Borda said, "By putting our trust in Jesus — that he has called us to this ministry — and by believing in the effectiveness of prayer, we abandon any desires to know what the effects are in the lives of priests through our small efforts on their behalf."

Father Aytona emphasized the importance of this prayer by citing Matthew 12:50, when Jesus says, "Whoever does the will of my heavenly Father is my brother and sister and mother."

"Fidelity to God's plan — that's spiritual motherhood," the priest explained. "Mary conceived Jesus in an act of faith by being obedient to God's will. Those who are faithful and do God's will share or participate in Mary's spiritual motherhood, in her concern for souls."

Father Aytona also makes clear that "spiritual mothers do the same thing Mary does when they are gazing on Christ the Lord in Eucharistic adoration: They are imitating Mary because she was the perfect adorer."

***Joseph Pronechen is a
Register staff writer.***