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THE ROLE OF CATHOLIC COMMUNITIES IN FORMING THE IMAGE OF THE MERCIFUL GOD

Arriving at the Image of the Merciful God Through the Previous Experience of Mercy in Interpersonal Relationships

Abstract

In this article we will attempt to show and explain the connection that exists between the Christian community and a believer's idea of a merciful God. We will make use of attachment theory and try to apply it to the relationship between the believer and God. We will try to use it to explain the dynamic that brings someone to experience God as benevolent and merciful while someone else perceives God as a strict judge or has become indifferent to God.

With the help of the compensation and correspondence hypotheses we will try to explain the correspondence (or continuing) and compensation (or substitute) role of the Catholic community in forming the image of a merciful God.

Considering the results of past investigations which confirm the connection and similarity between the relationship of a child with its mother and that of a believer with God, we will attempt to connect the concepts from attachment theory such as attachment figure, safe haven and safe base with the Catholic community. We want to show that the Catholic community can also be a substitute attachment figure, a safe haven and a safe base for the believer. If the believer truly experiences it as such then it is our hypothesis that the conditions have been created for his/her possibly not so positive image of God to have changed into a more positive image of God who is close and who supports him/her. We verified and confirmed this hypothesis with semi-structured interviews of 10 members of the Catholic Emmanuel Community.

Key words: attachment, image of God, community, compensation hypothesis, correspondence hypothesis.

Introduction

The main aim of this article is to show the connection that exists between the Catholic community and a believer's idea of a merciful God. We will make use of attachment theory¹ and try to apply it to the relationship between the believer and God. We will use them to try and explain why someone experiences God as benevolent and merciful while someone else perceives God as a strict judge or has even become indifferent to God. We are aware of the limitations of psychological concepts, which are only ever an approximation and can never fully explain the spiritual relationship with God.

There have been attempts in history to use the best possible metaphors and concepts to explain the mysterious relationship between God and man in such a way that people would understand. In the Bible we come across metaphors of shepherds and sheep, parables from viticulture and agriculture, and metaphors from the world of commerce². Nowadays, we also try to explain this relationship in a way that people will understand. Sometimes we use relational approaches from the field of interpersonal relations.

In this article we will use findings from attachment theory and relational family therapy. First of all we will try to summarise the past findings, which show a connection and similarity between the mother-child relationship and a believer's relationship with God³. With the help of both theories we will try to explain to what extent a person's ability to form relationships is marked by his primary family⁴ both in horizontal and vertical relationships. This does not mean that everything is determined in advance but a person is always strongly marked by them or even partly limited by them. This does not mean we negate personal freedom but only want to emphasise even more strongly the need for mercy and a transformational⁵ external intervention for a person to be freed. The latter is not possible without entering into sincere relationships both with God and fellow human beings. What should be the correct sequence is not a negligible pastoral question. Is it right to invite someone who has been badly hurt in his/her interpersonal relations and finds it hard to trust anyone, to turn to God and entrust himself/herself to him when he/she

¹ Cf. J. Bowlby, *Attachment: Attachment and Loss*, Vol. I., New York, Basic Books, 1969, p. 3-24.

² Cf. Matt 25:32; Luke 20:16; Matt 13:46.

³ Cf. L. A. Kirkpatrick and P. R. Shaver, *Attachment theory and religion: childhood attachments, religious beliefs and conversion*, *Journal for the scientific study of religion*, (1990), p. 315-320.

⁴ Cf. C. Gostečnik, *Relational Family Therapy: The Systemic, Interpersonal, and Intrapsychic Experience*, New York, Routledge, 2017, p. 15-45.

⁵ Cf. C. Gostečnik, T. Repic and R. Cvetek, *Redemptive experience in relational family therapy: a christian perspective*, *Journal of Religion and Health*, 47 (2008) 3, p. 386.

may also feel forgotten by him and is consequently also angry with him? Or should we first ensure that this person feels accepted and understood in his/her interpersonal relationships if he/she cannot directly turn to God or he/she still doesn't have a personal relationship with him? What should be our pastoral approach so as not to fail to see an individual's distress and that we do not remain simply on a psychological level which Christian therapists are often accused of doing?

There are two possible sequences, the so-called compensation⁶ way and the correspondence⁷ way, depending on the individual. Someone who is in distress will first of all be able to sincerely connect himself/herself with God which will give him/her a sufficient feeling of security and courage to be able to gradually risk opening up in human relationships. Someone else who has been hurt in his/her primary interpersonal relationships may shut himself/herself off both from God and from people. The path to God for such a person can be opened up by a transforming human relationship in which he will again feel favour, stability and security, which are usually preconditions for a further exploration and opening up in relations with people and God.

In this article we will concentrate above all on this second part – to what extent and in what way can human relationships and hence a particular Catholic community help an individual to form an image of God who is merciful and who loves us. For this purpose I carried out a qualitative investigation with the help of semi-structured interviews with members of the Catholic Emmanuel community in Slovenia who answered the questions on whether the life in the Emmanuel community affected their experience of God and in what way.

In this article we will use the past research, clinical and pastoral practice and the above qualitative investigation to confirm the hypothesis that a Catholic community which promotes good interpersonal relations also helps its members to have a better relationship with God.

1. Attachment theory

Originally introduced by John Bowlby⁸ as an alternative to psychoanalytic object-relations theory, attachment theory postulates a primary, biosocial behavioural system in the infant that was designed by evolution to keep the infant close to his/her primary caregiver, thereby protecting the infant from predators and other natural dangers. This postulated motivational system is distinct from other systems involved in nutrition

⁶ Cf. M. D. Ainsworth, *Attachments across the life span*, Bulletin of the New York Academy of medicine, 61 (1985) 9, p. 792.

⁷ Cf. L. A. Kirkpatrick and P. R. Shaver, *Attachment theory and religion*, p. 330-324.

⁸ Cf. J. Bowlby, *Attachment*, p. 3-24.

and reproduction, and is intended to replace the out-dated psychic energy model of motivation with a model more consonant with modern biology and ethology.

Active functioning of the system has its earliest roots in the mother – infant relationship. The infant emits social signals (crying, clinging) to which the mother (or other attachment figure) is more or less responsive, which in turn influences subsequent infant behaviour etc. When the system functions optimally, the infant develops a secure attachment to the mother in which she is perceived as a reliable source of protection and security. The secure attachment relationship is characterized by a confident exploration of the environment under normal circumstances and by proximity-seeking and comfort-seeking if a threat occurs. In the language of attachment researchers, the mother serves alternately as a secure base and as a safe haven for the infant. The attached person experiences the process in terms of the regulation of feeling secure.

The differences in infant–mother attachment have received considerable research attention in developmental psychology. In addition to a secure attachment, two insecure patterns have been widely researched: the avoidant type in which the infant seems to regard the mother as neither a secure base for exploration nor as a safe haven, and the anxious / ambivalent type in which clinging, proximity and comfort-seeking behaviour alternates episodically with anger and resistance. Anxious/ambivalent infants also generally appear more anxious and do not consistently evince confident exploration of the environment in the mother's presence. There is considerable evidence now that links the differences in infant attachment classifications to maternal caregiving behaviours and attitudes.

Longitudinal studies have shown that the social behaviour of 5 and 6 years old can be predicted reliably from their early attachment relationships⁹. Patterns of attachment have also been shown to perpetuate themselves across generations, from mother to child.

Although Bowlby's development of the attachment theory was based primarily on the attachment system's evolutionary function of providing protection to human (and other primate) infants, he strongly maintained that the attachment system exerts an important influence on behaviour "from the cradle to the grave". Researchers provided an extensive list of striking similarities between early attachment and adult romantic love and argued that adult romantic love represents the integration of three behavioural systems – attachment, reproduction and caregiving¹⁰. Hazan

⁹ Cf. A. F. Lieberman, *Preschoolers' competence with a peer: relations with attachment and peer experience*, *Child Development*, (1977) p. 1277.

¹⁰ Cf. S. M. Johnson, *Love sense: the revolutionary new science of romantic relationships*, New York, Little Brown and Company, 2013, p. 59-85.

and Shaver¹¹ showed empirically that adult romantic love relationships tend to fall into three major patterns that closely resemble Ainsworth's three infant-mother attachment classifications – secure, anxious / ambivalent, and avoidant – and that these individual differences are correlated in theoretically predictable ways with people's beliefs about romantic love, their experiences in close relationships, and their retrospective descriptions of childhood relationships with their parents.

Several researchers have made careful attempts to distinguish attachment bonds from other kinds of close relationships¹². Ainsworth distinguished “affectional bonds” from role-oriented relationships and emphasized the secure-base and haven functions as distinguishing features of attachment relationships per se.

2. Attachment theory and the Catholic community

With the help of the key principles of attachment theory we will try to explain the role of God and the Catholic community as the surrogate figures of attachment which have significant consequences for man's perception of God.

For people who live in faith, the connection with God is a primary source of comfort, security and equilibrium in a constantly changing world. In the Bible, God is regularly referred to as a safe haven, source of security and comfort. In John's gospel we are explicitly invited to trust our heavenly father and to come “home” to him¹³. Some places in the Bible call God father, friend and beloved¹⁴. This means that in our relationship with God we can find all the key elements listed by attachment theory as presented in the earliest stages of our life in relations between the child and the primary personal attachment which is usually the mother.

3. Connectedness

The first principle of attachment theory is that we all yearn for being attached¹⁵ and in a relationship. We all have an inbuilt mechanism for connecting with someone who will react when we are in danger and will protect us. The desire to connect forms our nervous system and the mass of neurones we call the brain. The need for attachment forms our brains, which develop accordingly from the very earliest stages of child-

¹¹ Cf. C. Hazan and P. Shaver, *Romantic love conceptualized as an attachment process*, *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 52 (1987) 3, p. 511.

¹² Cf. M. D. Ainsworth, *Attachments across the life span*, p. 793-795.

¹³ Cf. John 14:23.

¹⁴ Cf. Isa 66:13; Luke 13:34; John 15:5; Isa 54:5.

¹⁵ Cf. S. M. Johnson and V. E. Whiffen, *Attachment processes in couple and family therapy*, New York, Guilford Press, 2003, p. 18-43.

hood onwards. We feel this yearning most strongly when we experience uncertainty and we feel vulnerable. In moments of doubt, trouble and fears we naturally turn to the person who can offer us stability and comfort and can pacify us. This is confirmed by army chaplains who tell us how, when faced with the greatest dangers, many soldiers turn for help to their mothers, wives and most of them to God. So we can say that a man's search and yearning for God is similar to his yearning for a connection with a human figure. "When you call to me and come and pray to me, I shall listen to you. When you search for me, you will find me; when you search wholeheartedly for me, I shall let you find me, says the Lord."¹⁶

Attachment theory researchers speak of the yearning and capacities of a child who is safely attached to his parents and who places everything he experiences into a complete and meaningful entity, in contrast with some interior existential and emotional fragmentation. Saint Augustine speaks of a similar yearning and intimate experience in his relationship with God when he says: "Our hearts are restless until they rest in You"¹⁷.

4. A safe haven

The second principle of attachment theory which fits in well with the Catholic faith is that the proximity of a beloved person gives us a feeling of security: peace and comfort¹⁸. We can find the conviction that our connection with God is our best source of security in many religious texts, songs and prayers. This is also the content of the Christmas message: "Do not be afraid! I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people."¹⁹ and "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to men on whom his favour rests."²⁰ These are two fundamental messages: not to be afraid and men on earth will have peace, which is like a summary of the second principle of attachment theory.

Many investigations dealing with connections point to the fact that when we connect with a person to whom we become attached, our nervous system calms down, the amygdala– our brain's fear centre – is turned off and emotional equilibrium is established²¹. Only then can the part of us that is most flexible, fundamental and adaptable appear. This means that we are then in the best state to learn new things.

¹⁶ Jer 29:12-14.

¹⁷ Augustinus. *Izpovedi*. Vol. 4, Zbirka Cerkevni očetje, Celje, Mohorjeva družba, 2001, p. 5.

¹⁸ Cf. S. M. Johnson, *Love sense: the revolutionary new science of romantic relationships*, p. 38.

¹⁹ Lk 2:10.

²⁰ Lk 2:14.

²¹ Cf. T. Lewis, *Fari Amini and Richard Lannon*, *A general theory of love*, New York, Random House, 2000, p. 66-77.

The importance of calming relationships is confirmed by research carried out amongst women who felt they were in distress and unconnected with their partners²². They were invited to have brain scans.

They found that no matter they lay alone in the machine, a stranger is holding their hand, or their partner is holding their hand, when they saw a red X that signalled a shock might be coming, their brain lit up in alarm, and if they were shocked on their ankles they reported that it was indeed very painful.

Their brains were scanned while their hand was held by a stranger or their partner. When a red X appeared on the screen (which the women watched during the scan) to warn them that they may feel a gentle electric shock on their ankles, an alarm went off in their brains. If an electric shock was indeed produced, the women said they felt pain in their leg no matter if they were alone or if their hand was held by a stranger or even their partner. Then these women and their husbands were offered marriage counselling where they learnt how to approach each other, how to offer each other security and how to strengthen and preserve their mutually calming closeness.

Then they were tested again and their brains were scanned again. When the women saw the red X, their brains again “turned on” the alarm when they were alone during the testing and also when a stranger held their hands. However, if their husband held their hand, they remained calm and the electric shocks were now “unpleasant” but no longer painful. This was not the result of a better control over the fear centre because the brain scans showed that this centre was not activated. The research shows the strength of the husband’s touch and proximity as well as how strong is the need in our brains for connectedness and trust and how connectedness in a partnership changes our perception and reaction to threats.

5. A secure base

The third important principle of attachment theory speaks about the fact that loving connections early on in life make us stronger²³. Such connections offer us a safe area from which we can go out into the world, explore and grow and at the same time successfully overcome fears we may come across. This principle stems from the research carried out by observing children. When the children knew that they had a so-called safe base to which they can return any time and that there will always be

²² Cf. S. M. Johnson et al., *Soothing the threatened brain: leveraging contact comfort with emotionally focused therapy*, PloS one, 8 (2013) 11, e79314.

²³ Cf. M. S. Ainsworth, *Infant-mother attachment*, American psychologist, 34 (1979) 10, p. 932.

someone there who will take care of them, then they were more inquisitive in exploring their surroundings. They were not afraid of taking risks and were more self-confident and more actively involved. The fact that they could rely on someone gave them strength and they became more independent.

We can also apply this to the relationship with God. If we know that we can rely on him and that he will always be there for us, then this makes us stronger. The feeling of being safely connected to Almighty God who loves us is a way of dealing with our greatest source of hurt – the fear of loss and the fear of death²⁴. This is how we can understand many passages of the Bible: “On the day I called you answered me; you made me bold and stout-hearted.”²⁵ and “He is my mighty rock, my refuge.”²⁶ Understanding safe attachment shows us how belief in God as an attachment figure can be a successful source of personal fulfilment and growth throughout one’s life. Those people who are safely attached to their loved ones react more constructively to anger, are more generous and tolerant, deal better with stress and form a positive image of themselves as someone who is worthy of being loved. Therefore we can conclude that safe attachment to people that are important to us is positively connected with a greater commitment to mature religious convictions.

6. Pain in separation

The final principle of attachment theory which we will mention here says that as a man is made for attachment, he also feels pain at the loss of this attachment. In the brain the pain of loss is located in the same place as physical pain²⁷. Pain warns us of danger, and separation from someone else is a danger for a man. When we cannot connect with the people we like, including God, we suffer. Not even Jesus, the son of God, was spared the pain of loneliness and loss when he cried out from the cross: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me!”²⁸ We come across a similar experience of loneliness and abandonment in her relationship with God in Mother Teresa’s diaries: “The more I want to connect with God, the less wanted I feel.”²⁹

²⁴ Cf. L. M. McLean et al., *A couple based intervention for patients and caregivers facing end stage cancer: outcomes of a randomized controlled trial*, *PsychoOncology*, 22 (2013) 1, p. 28-38.

²⁵ Ps 138:3.

²⁶ Ps 62:7.

²⁷ Cf. M. A. Hofer, *Hidden regulators in attachment, separation and loss*, *Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development*, 59 (1994) 2-3, p. 192.

²⁸ Mk 15:34.

²⁹ Mother Teresa. *Come be my light: the private writings of the saint of Calcutta*, New York, Doubleday, 2007, p. 1-2.

7. Connecting with others and connecting with God

As we have already mentioned, there are three basic ways of connecting with those to whom we turn when we are in trouble or in emotional need: searching for the other, anxious pleading and remaining at a distance (an attempt to connect without the risk of being hurt). The first approach is the most effective as it calls us to be in harmony with our emotions, to ask and to seek what we need, to identify ourselves with our yearnings and not be afraid to draw closer to our loved ones. In this way we form a strong link with the others which makes us stronger and builds a lifelong connection. However, turning to others often inspires uncertainty and so the person resorts to less effective and unreliable strategies: anxious and avoidant. When a person feels caught up in an anxious form of searching for contact, they inadvertently do everything to be rejected and are consequentially in despair while at the same time realising that they find it hard to trust or accept the concern that others are prepared to give them. With the other, avoidant strategy, as soon as the individual perceives that they may end up being too dependent on the other, they withdraw and deny any need for connection. These three strategies can be observed in all emotionally significant relationships, including the relationship with God³⁰.

Let us look at three different examples of connection with God:

- Ana speaks calmly about her safe connection with God: *“I know that when I need him I can always turn to him and find peace. My prayer is not always answered but the awareness that I am heard and that I can ask for help remains stable.”*
- Katja has doubts about her faith and God’s proximity: *“I know I should not speak like this but these days I become truly angry when I try to pray! When I began going to church again I was so certain that God helps but now I could cry out: Are you even listening to me? Do you even care about me? If you did you would help me. Maybe I am not even important to you”. Katja is overwhelmed by a feeling of anxiety and agitation and has the feeling that she cannot count on God even if she prays to him every day.*
- Tomaž was brought up in the faith and goes to church but believes that it is still better to rely on yourself. *“After all, in the end you are always on your own and nobody is interested in how you are. That is why there is no point in relying too much on God. That is simply the nature of the life we must live. If it is hard, try to forget it as quickly as possible.”* Tomaž obviously rejects the need to connect with God and

³⁰ Cf. L. A. Kirkpatrick and P. R. Shaver, *An attachment-theoretical approach to romantic love and religious belief*, *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 18 (1992) 3, p. 266.

he tries to avoid depending on him. He finds it hard to put himself into God's hands.

The safest strategy for connecting with another person is the first one. It gives us the most effective way of facing the needs of attachment – the proximity for which we yearn. Those who turn to God in this way have probably turned to their parents in a similar way. There they have learnt that they can reasonably expect that figures of attachment will be accessible, responsive and faithful to them. These persons experience the world mostly as a safe place and are therefore more emotionally stable.

This is confirmed by research which shows that children that are being looked after by parents in a sensitive and loving way and are allowed to show their love for God from an early age, will also be more religious later on. However, they also say that moments of connection in a partnership lead to more love for God. This means that when an individual's relationships with those who are the most important to them – their family and partner – are loving, this opens them towards their love for God. Research also shows that people with faith are grateful and find it easier to believe in a fulfilled and happy life³¹. Another study similarly finds that safe attachment coupled with emotional stability and positive expectations often leads to a meditative and conversational form of prayer rather than prayer that is focused on the fulfilment of demands³².

The individual who has experienced the sensitive and soothing care of his/her parents, partner or community finds it easier to trust and believe in the meaningfulness and order of the world which is permeated by God's love. This feeling of trust and increased proximity to God usually results in a greater respect for the family and the partner. This is obvious for many individuals and couples who following a retreat or community meeting testify that they can act better towards their loved ones for at least a few days.

In an anxious form of attachment the individual makes attempts to enter into relationships in the "now you see me, now you don't" way, as most of them have experienced in their early childhood. This experience leaves them uncertain as they are constantly afraid of loneliness and the feeling of neglect or abandonment. This same drama is then replayed in the relationship with God. Anxiously attached people often feel neglected by God.

Katja turns to God to compensate for her lack of safe connections in her life. She approaches God in the same way that she yearns for

³¹ Cf. P. Granqvist, *Attachment and religiosity in adolescence: cross-sectional and longitudinal evaluations*, *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 28 (2002) 2, p. 260.

³² Cf. K. R. Byrd and A. D. Boe, *The correspondence between attachment dimensions and prayer in college students*, *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, 11 (2001) 1, p. 9.

and enters into her relationship with her husband: sometimes she begs and at other times she accuses him angrily. This means that her prayer also frequently contains anxious elements. So even when her prayers are answered and she could relax and receive the blessing she finds it hard to do this.

In avoidant attachment people shut themselves off from the world and other people as they feel that those closest to them are insensitive to their needs or even very cruel while they themselves are most vulnerable. They can repress their needs and suppress their expectations. However, this suppression of needs always demands much effort as whenever they feel vulnerable they want to suppress their emotions and escape. These people do not believe in a caring God and such an attitude can often be found even in active Christians³³. They see others as unloving and perceive God as strict and distant. Their innate yearning for security nevertheless comes to the surface and then these people try to turn to God although they are incapable of accepting his love.

8. The role of the Catholic community

Studies have shown that if an individual has a new experience of connection and receiving loving responses from their partner or they experience security in their relationship with God, they can then connect more safely both in their family and religious relations³⁴. The individual can then begin to perceive both God and his/her partner as persons who accept them and do not condemn them.

We can speak of the significance of the Catholic community in forming an individual's image of God above all through the prism of the correspondence and compensation hypotheses³⁵. The correspondence hypothesis maintains that persons with a positive image of themselves and others, i.e. believing and securely attached individuals, are supposed to have a positive image of God – a God who supports you and on whom you can rely. These persons will sooner choose the kind of Catholic community that presents God as merciful and will continue to connect with the kind of God they knew before and perhaps this image will become even more concrete. According to this hypothesis, persons with an avoidant attachment would be closer to an agnostic/atheistic attitude, which is founded on a negative image of God or an image of God who is distant

³³ Cf. T. Clinton and J. Straub, *God attachment*, New York, Howard books, 2010, p. 83-85.

³⁴ Cf. J. R. Dickie et al., *Parent-child relationships and children's images of God*, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, (1997) p. 25.

³⁵ Cf. P. Granqvist and B. Hagekull, *Religiousness and perceived childhood attachment: profiling socialized correspondence and emotional compensation*, *Journal for the scientific study of religion*, (1999) p. 254.

and unattainable while persons with an ambivalent attachment would have an emotionally changeable relationship with God.

However, if we take into account the findings of attachment theory and relational family therapy³⁶, we know that the need and yearning for connection runs deeper than what our personal, genetic or family past may determine. Compensation theory speaks about this. If we bear in mind the action of grace, which in a therapeutic sense is the transformative event after which the emotional patterns of the way a person reacts when in crisis change as do the forms of connecting with other people, we can understand why some adults change the way they are attached to those that are closest to them and to God.

Many experience the missing substitute figure of attachment in the Catholic community where they can safely attach to someone for the first time in their lives and open up. This openness, vulnerability and acceptance of the feeling of powerlessness is important for a person to be able to open up to God's merciful action. This dynamic is well summarised by the following statements of community members on how they experience the community:

"When I converted and became a Christian I entered the community the same year and was accepted as a person and brother on the road following Christ. No-one judged me. The welcome I experienced from certain people brought me closer to God. The road to him opens up through our brothers and sisters."

"I met some young people who really lived the faith, who prayed and followed the teaching of the Church and were happy. And they took interest in me without wanting anything from me; they accepted me as I am. I really felt this was God touching me. I was touched by the brotherly care for one another and the example of life with the Lord that makes one happy."

These two statements confirm both of the above hypotheses. Someone from a safely attached relationship probably will not join a community where he would have to be afraid of God's proximity and would have to establish a so-called dangerous form of connection with him. At the same time, someone who has not experienced safe attachment in their primary relationships continues to yearn for God's merciful touch to soothe and heal him. We could conclude that Augustine's famous line: "Our hearts are restless until they rest in You" could at least partly fit into the framework of the compensation hypothesis – even though I am not yet at peace, I yearn for this peace and will not stop searching until I achieve it or receive it.

³⁶ C. Gostečnik, *Relational Family Therapy*, p. 5-20.

A Catholic community can therefore offer a believer both a safe refuge and a safe base, which is essential for everyone in order to continue making safe connections or even to make their very first safe attachment.

This can be achieved by means of a more intensive and at the same time safe form of association. These two features of a modern community are achieved through weekly meetings in small groups and also thanks to the rule that forbids one to criticise others.

“Many people have said “welcome” to me. And this felt so nice inside.”

Without sufficiently intensive relationships there can be no changes in the form of attachment. It is interesting that therapeutic models as well as anonymous alcoholics³⁷ and new Catholic communities all emphasise the importance of weekly meetings alongside Sunday masses. This is how the community is built and people feel united as brothers and sisters.

“What a joy it is to meet so many people you like and who you know also like you. Doing everything together: praising, going to mass, listening to lectures, walking, adoration, eating, everything creates a feeling of joyful togetherness that is a gift of God’s grace.”

At the same time, the founder of the Emmanuel Community Pierre Goursat³⁸ emphasised that abstaining from criticising other members of the community should be one of the community’s most important rules. The importance of this attitude is confirmed by contemporary research which shows how harmful criticism³⁹ can be. *“The fact that there is this rule of no criticism makes me relaxed and I find it easier to be myself. It also strengthens the feeling of being welcome and God’s mercy when I realise my mistakes.”*

Conclusion

The research shows just how important the community is and it speaks of the strong link between the culturally prevalent form of parenthood and society’s general idea of the Supernatural. This means that if an individual feels accepted by his parents there will be a much higher probability that he will experience God as merciful and vice versa. That is why the subconscious convictions of the members of the community are important as they often reflect on the subconscious interiorised form of parenthood. And the transmission of the faith to the children is

³⁷ Cf. J. D. Levin, *Couple and family therapy of addiction*, London, Jason Aronson 1998, p. 34-44.

³⁸ Cf. M. Catta, *Pierre Goursat: besede ponižnega ustanovitelja*, Ljubljana, Založba Emanuel, p. 20-25.

³⁹ Cf. J. Gottman, J. Mordechai and R. Wayne Levenson, *The timing of divorce: predicting when a couple will divorce over a 14-year period*, *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 62 (2000) 3, p. 737.

very closely linked to this too. Secure attachment in the community and elsewhere enables learning and accepting the values of the environment because the individual's feeling of security means he is more open and therefore more likely to accept his parents' or the community's suggestions and invitations.

Let us conclude this article with Freud who emphasised the importance of primary relationships in the family and the creation of an intrapsychic image of God. Despite the fact that Freud mistakenly interpreted that God is simply a person's fictional defence mechanism or a projection of a person's image of his/her own strong father. But by doing this he attracted the attention of later researchers who actually began to uncover that an individual's image of God is very strongly determined by the relationship which this person had with the primary guardian or figure of attachment. Just as the family plays a decisive role in the first years of a child's life, in later years this role is also played by relations with peers and other important relations or absence of relations. And these other relations, which have an important positive influence on an individual and his/her experience of God can or should be provided by every Catholic community.