

# Digging Deep

Fostering the Spirituality of Young Men

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For John-Michael & Patrick,  
two quite wonderful young men  
and my daily source of delight;  
and for Marian,  
my very best friend.



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## Introduction

“The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.” (Luke 2:40)

### Tread Carefully

This book is like a map for use on a journey to unearth the sacred treasures of manhood. Exploring the inner world of the spiritual has the potential to be life-giving and richly rewarding. But this process requires digging; it is not to be undertaken lightly. A man’s spirituality is a powerful thing. This journey should begin only if you are ready to engage in the process and be transformed. Jesus promised the reward of life to the full (John 10:10) to those who followed him.

### Sacred Circles

A priest working in Africa wondered why—after a century of his church building and operating schools, hospitals, and social programs—there were no Christians among the adults of the villages. One day he resolved to go and speak with one of the tribal elders:

I asked Ndangoya if we could speak to him about something very important. He immediately sent for the elders of the three neighboring kraals, and when they arrived, he asked what I wanted to talk about. I said I wanted to talk to them about God, and he answered, “Who can refuse to talk about God?”

I then pointed out that we were well known among the Masai for our work in schools and hospitals, and for our interest in the Masai and their cattle. But now I no longer wanted to talk about schools and hospitals, but about God in the life of the Masai, and about the message of Christianity. Indeed it was for this very work of explaining the message of Christianity to the different peoples of Africa that I came here from far away.

Ndangoya looked at me for a long time, and then said in a puzzled way, “If this is why you came here, why did you wait so long to tell us about this?” (Vincent J. Donovan, *Christianity Rediscovered*, p. 22)

Is it possible that in many theology and religious education classes and youth groups, we spend so much time doing good things that we miss the opportunity to engage the message of Christianity through what it means to be, and live, as a man? What could be more wonderful than sitting in a circle of men, talking about God and the promises of Christianity in our lives?

Regardless of whether it was an African tribal council, a group of Native American braves, or King Arthur's legendary Knights of the Round Table, men have gathered in circles to address the sacred business of manhood. Rites of passage have in the past provided the opportunity for boys to take their place as men in these gatherings. Young males' participation in these rituals was of utmost importance and an undisputed sign of their attainment of manhood.

Today, it is up to fathers, teachers, priests, scout leaders, youth ministers, and mentors to provide opportunities for meaningful conversation with the next generation. The focus of this book is to help initiate and sustain circles of men to discuss, ponder, and pray together both in relationships with each other and God.

### Sacred Business

Although traditional wisdom tells us the conversations are still essential, the content of men's sacred business has undergone changes. In the past, people with power accepted inequalities as part of a natural order of things. As a result, systems of structural dominance were unjust but unquestioned. White people dominated people of color, men dominated women, and the rich dominated the poor. These inequities are in direct contradiction to the Gospels, which encourage all people to live in equality as sisters and brothers.

The system known as "patriarchal domination" or "male domination" resulted in psychological, spiritual, and physical violence. The most obvious victims of this power abuse were women and girls in society; the patriarchal system denied them most opportunities for advancement, and kept them from fulfilling the potential of their birthright. Although much has changed in the last thirty years to improve the status of women in society, there are still aspects of the culture that do not only harm females throughout the world, but also their male counterparts.

We will continue to miss the mark of genuine equality unless we address the liberation of males from the dominant patriarchal societal structures that prevent men from living lives to the full. Traditional stereotypes that limit boys from developing into the fullness of their potential manhood are no less violent than the outdated thinking that discourages girls from reaching their potential. Unjust systems of the past limited girls by restricting them in what they could "do." Those same systems *define* boys by what they "do" and restrict how males can "be" as men.

### Gender Differences

Although gender studies suggests that more females are naturally better at "being" and relating, and the majority of males are inclined toward "doing," stereotypes can limit the profound mystery that men and women are made in the image and likeness of

God. However, just as there are physiological differences that influence the development of males and females even before birth, it is also important to recognize psychological gender differences.

The psychologist Erik Erikson observed that the path to wholeness is different for men and women. Although the culture has reinforced certain masculine and feminine characteristics, both men and women need to develop a full range of skills and abilities to negotiate life with meaning. Another psychologist, Carl Jung, saw certain qualities as being "feminine" and "masculine," but he did not think that they were exclusively male or female. Rather, to be whole, one had to psychologically integrate both masculine and feminine qualities. Jung recognized a balanced or "whole person" by their integration of the whole range of human qualities. The psychological insights of both these psychologists show us that "stereotypes" of what a male or female should be are not only false, but inequitable for both men and women.

When we confine men to the world of doing, their inner life becomes impoverished. What many men find is that even if they wish to rein in their doing for the sake of their being, they lack the skills to do so. Many find that they have either forgotten how to attend to their spiritual lives effectively, or never learned how in the first place. As a result, their relationships with God and others are not as rich and life-giving as they could be. This leaves many men constantly yearning and searching for something more; something, ironically, which is as close as their own breath. As the Scriptures remind us, God "who gives life and breath to everything" (Acts 17:25).

### Spirituality and Wholeness

Our Catholic Tradition teaches that we are spiritual beings incarnated in a physical body for the duration of what we call our "life." People of many different religions have always believed that a person's spirit leaves their body when they die, so it seems to be a universal phenomenon that our spirituality is inseparable from our life. No spirit, no life. It is vital for "life" that we attend to our spiritual needs. Our spirituality is our life longing for wholeness. This is where we find meaning, and a man can only find meaning in life as a man. Essentially, wholeness (or holiness) is what we seek to satisfy our hungers, yearnings and longings in life. As St. Augustine said, "our hearts will not be at peace until they rest in You." There is simply no other way to find wholeness, peace, or happiness. Neither spiritual hunger nor restlessness will go away if ignored. It will surface in other, disguised forms for attention.

The role of religion is to address this restlessness toward God. Religion, at its best, helps men and women find and bind together their wholeness as they journey through life with all of its joys, delights, crises, struggles, and moments of ordinary, everyday living. Religion and spirituality are not mutually exclusive. Religion needs spirituality for vitality; spirituality needs religion to provide the wisdom of the ages.

Wise men of spirit, or spiritual men, make a difference for the better in their families, in their workplace, among their friends and in their world; they make good husbands and fathers. The clinical evidence indicates that they are happier, healthier, and they live longer.

## The Spiritual Life of Adolescent Males

When boys' needs are met in a nurturing environment, they will develop into men of spirit with the skills to develop a healthy inner life. Jesus urged his followers to "go into your room" in secrecy (Matt. 6:6). That "room" is the sacred domain of the inner life. Fostering the spiritual life of young men involves learning to be comfortable in that room, which is a place to be still, reflect, and communicate and trust in someone—or something—outside themselves.

The Gospel of John tells the story of two young men meeting Jesus for the first time (1:35–39). When Jesus asked them what they were looking for, it seems that they didn't know, or didn't know what to say, and so they just blurted out the first thing that came to mind: "where are you staying?" This tells us a lot about young males and their enthusiasm in seeking, as well as their difficulties in awareness and communication.

Girls on average are naturally better at communication than are boys. Some researchers say that emotional literacy is the most significant factor when considering the development of boys. However, in my experience of working with boys in high schools and retreat programs, I know that boys are most capable of developing healthy emotional and spiritual awareness, as well as good communication skills. What we need are the right conditions and the patience to have the conversations that need to take place.

## The Passage into Manhood

Masculinity is a gift, a pearl of great price. Manhood needs to be celebrated as essentially very good, but becoming a man is complex. In the past, particularly in traditional societies and cultures, the men would take the boys away into a secret or sacred place at the appropriate times to facilitate their growth or maturity to manhood. This was seen very much as a spiritual rite or sacred ritual. Individuals would leave as boys and return as men. The transition, or adolescence, lasted as long as the rite of passage. Rites of passage have largely disappeared from modern Western culture; the result is that adolescence can ambiguously span any length of time between ages eleven or twelve to the mid- to late-twenties.

Over the last few years, I have designed and facilitated a number of three-week retreats for young men, ages fourteen to sixteen. The group size has varied from twenty-five to fifty. The retreat involves service to the poor and marginalized, Scripture study, and silent reflection. At the beginning of the three weeks, the boys enjoy the satisfaction of "doing" something with, and for, the poor and marginalized. However, they find the other aspects of the retreat challenging. By the end of the three weeks, they also appreciate the nourishment of Scripture study and of the quiet reflection time. Having learned to dig deep, they are no longer boys, but men of faith. On each occasion I have been involved with this retreat, others have marveled at how we begin with boys and finish three weeks later with fine, young, emotionally articulate men of depth, maturity, and integrity.

## Overview of This Manual

*Digging Deep: Fostering the Spirituality of Young Men* is a resource manual with activities designed to take young men from the surface mode of "doing" to a deeper place where they can experience the treasure of "being." Part 1 places considerable emphasis on preparing the soil and developing competence with the tools for digging beyond the surface of conversations with adolescent males. Part 2 focuses on specific issues, including identity, power and anger, and sexuality. The appendix includes a father/son retreat designed for a weekend format, but this is easily adaptable to other time frames and venues. The appendix also contains suggestions for coordinating the activities in this book with parallel sessions for girls, found in Saint Mary's Press Voices series.

## Who Can Use This Manual

*Digging Deep: Fostering the Spirituality of Young Men* is for use by men working with adolescent males in an all-male environment. The material works best with males aged thirteen to nineteen, although junior high boys may benefit from some of the simpler activities, and most activities can be easily adapted for young adult men in their twenties.

Interestingly, my experience has been that it is often at the initiative of mothers that the spiritual quest of manhood often begins. My first attempt to have a retreat for fathers and sons resulted in widespread cancellations at the last minute. I received a steady stream of phone calls from mothers telling me that they wanted their husbands and sons to participate, but that their husbands, and sometimes their sons, had fears and apprehensions. (See p. 89 in chapter 4 of part 2 for a list of common fears and fallacies.) I was able to convince the mothers that these fears were unfounded, and I encouraged them to use their influence. They did and the fathers and sons agreed to go. The retreat and many more since have been successful, thanks to the initiative of these boys' mothers. They saw what was needed and provided the initial momentum.

## Praxis of the Sessions

Each section in *Digging Deep* begins with an overview presenting theological and spiritual background for the adult leader. In part 1, there are activities to practice skills such as listening and talking, telling stories, journaling, and different forms of prayer, including rituals. The activities in part 2 delve more deeply into specific topics, beginning with a focus activity or stimulus (such as a movie or story); then moving to written and verbal reflection by individuals through group discussion, journaling, and prayer. Again, the focus is less on "doing" than on learning to "be."

## How to Get Started

Begin with the sacred circle. Simply coming together in circles changes the immediate environment. Each time you gather boys into a circle for discussion or prayer, draw attention to the fact that all present are now included together in this circle of men. Acknowledge this every time so that it does not go unnoticed. The circle is a powerfully inclusive shape in which to gather for the following reasons:

- no one sits at the “head” and therefore the circle is a symbol of equality of power and prestige
- everyone in a circle is equally visible, so no one can go unnoticed
- a circle is a natural gathering shape, as demonstrated by the way boys will huddle in a circle on a sports field to discuss their game plan and motivate each other
- in a circle, the focus tends towards the center; whether this is something physical, like a candle; or something intangible, like an issue for discussion

### Creating the Environment

A few select items can transform a regular meeting space into sacred space. Decide with the group what is needed for your sacred space and where the items will be placed. Begin by asking the group members about “a man’s sacred space.” What does it look like? Suggest some simple ideas like a Bible and a candle; the group, however, may have other suggestions: pieces of wood, stones, posters, or a simple cross or crucifix. Encourage them to explain the symbolism or significance of each suggestion. Give responsibility for each item to a member of the group.

### Involving the Senses

As often as possible, enhance your meeting space and time with music, fire, and incense, involving as many of the five senses as possible. Keep charcoal briquettes in a clay or metal pot half-filled with sand as a convenient and contained way to build a fire outside. Small pieces of incense, added to the fire, contribute to the mood of prayer, signifying something important. Recall that since ancient times, incense has been a sign of holiness and purification; as part of our sacred rituals it communicates awe and respect for God. It also symbolizes our prayers rising to God as the incense smoke rises to the skies or heavens above.

It is also a good idea to keep a collection of music that sets the tone for prayer and ritual. The music selections below are representative of a good “male sound.” They are subtle and gentle, and the voices are obviously men’s voices. Using these helps dispel the falsehood that religious music might not be “masculine”:

- Chesnokov, Pavel, “We Praise Thee,” St. Petersburg Chamber Choir, Nikolai Korniev, conductor from *Credo*, Phillips 446 089-2.
- *Sacred Treasures: Choral Masterworks from Russia* (1998). San Francisco: Hearts of Space, 11109-2.
- *Sacred Treasures II: Allegri’s Miserere* (1999). Osnabruk Youth Choir, conductor Johannes Rae. San Francisco: Hearts of Space, 11112-2.

## Tips for Success

- Model what you wish for them to become. Boys need men to show them the way.
- Be yourself. Don’t pretend.
- Make sure you have thoroughly read through the activities you have chosen beforehand. Know where you are going with these. Make sure you have all the materials and resources you need.
- Be flexible and adaptable. Adapt these activities to the boys you work with. Do not attempt to adapt the boys to the activities.
- Be prepared for things to work out differently from what you expect.
- Communicate your expectations and wishes frequently and clearly.
- Be open to suggestions and say so.
- Make your young men welcome and responsible for welcoming each other.
- Trust in the divine loving Providence (and divine sense of humor) that brought this group together.
- Pray.

## Resources

### Male Spirituality

- Pable, Martin. *The Quest for the Male Soul: In Search of Something More*. Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 1996. Pable, a Capuchin friar draws on his experience in retreat work and psychology to give an easily accessible and clear picture of what male spirituality is all about.
- Pryce, Mark. *Finding a Voice: Men, Women, and the Community of the Church*. London: SCM Press, 1996. With an understanding that we are the Church, Pryce gives insights into the world of male spirituality and its significance to men and their relationships.
- Rohr, Richard. *Quest for the Grail*. New York: Crossroad Publishing, 2001.
- Rohr, Richard, and Martos, Joseph. *The Wild Man’s Journey: Reflections on Male Spirituality*. Cincinnati: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 1992. In both these books, Rohr, a well-known Franciscan writer and speaker, uses myth blended with everyday men’s experiences. In doing so he makes significant contributions to an understanding of masculine spirituality.
- Sanford, John A. *The Man Who Wrestled with God: Light from the Old Testament on the Psychology of Individuation*. Rev. ed. New York: Paulist Press (1987). This is a most significant work of scholarship, but at the same time it is a good read. Sanford uses the psychology of individuation to make the wisdom of the Scriptures alive and relevant to the life of every man. This book remains ever fresh and full of wisdom.



## Male Psychology

- Biddulph, Steve. *Manhood: A Book About Setting Men Free*. Sydney, Australia: Finch Publishing, 1994. Biddulph writes in everyday language about the most complex aspects of men's lives, and delivers much clarity. A good book for fathers and sons to read together.
- Clare, Anthony. *On Men: Masculinity in Crisis*. London: Arrow Books, 2001. A most engaging and readable book, enlightening the search for what it means to be a man today. The book reminds the reader that the word "crisis" means both problem and opportunity.
- Corneau, Guy. *Absent Fathers, Lost Sons: The Search for Masculine Identity*. Boston: Shambala Publications, 1991. Corneau has much wisdom on the father/son relationship and its consequences for the lives we live. This book reveals a great deal about the emotional and spiritual lives of men with its unique insights.
- Kindlon, Dan, and Thompson, Michael. *Raising Cain: Protecting the Emotional Life of Boys*. New York: Ballantine, 1999. Coming from their experience working with boys as psychologists, this book gives a very recognizable glimpse into the inner life of boys.
- Moore, Robert, and Gillette, Douglas. *King, Warrior, Magician, Lover: Rediscovering the Archetypes of the Mature Masculine*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1990. Using the four archetypes of the title, the authors offer a guide to self-transformation on the premises that men are complex and that there is no one "right" way to be a man.
- Pollack, William S. *Real Boys: Rescuing Our Sons from the Myths of Boyhood*. New York: Random House, 1998. This is a foundational book about the psychology of boys and adolescents from the perspective of a psychologist.
- Real, Terrance. *I Don't Want to Talk About It: Overcoming the Secret Legacy of Male Depression*. New York: Scribner, 1997. Perhaps one of the most valuable contributions to articulating and understanding the life of a male in our time and place. Real's insights reveal great wisdom and understanding. This book should be required reading before parenthood.
- Tacey, David J. *Remaking Men: Jung, Spirituality and Social Change*. London: Routledge, 1997. Tacey's application of Jung's psychology to spirituality in a time of social change reflects on the nature of masculinity with insight and hope.
- Thompson, Keith, ed. *To Be A Man: In Search of the Deep Masculine*. New York: Tarcher/Putnam, 1991. A collection of essays and interviews on a wide range of topics central to the lives of men, from an extensive range of poets and writers who all have some gold worth digging for.