

# *Fatherless* Discussion Guide

## Resources

Discussion group participants will need two books:

1. The novel *Fatherless* by Brian J. Gail
2. *The New American Bible*

Additionally, there should be at least one copy of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (second edition) for your group to reference, if needed.

## II Program Structure

We recommend a four-week program as follows:

Week one: Part One – The Call

Week two: Part Two – The Crisis

Week three: Part Three – The Charism

Week four: Part Four – The Epilogue

## III Discussion Format

Although a variety of time lengths could work, we recommend a 90-minute session, formatted as follows:

Greetings and Opening Prayer	10 minutes
Group Discussion	75 minutes
Closing Prayer and Petitions	5 minutes

## IV Group Leadership

The Group Leader should have a mastery of the novel's main themes and a working knowledge of Pope Paul VI's *Humanae Vitae* and Pope John Paul II's *Theology of the Body*.

## V Part One Questions (“The Call”) - See pages 1 to 44.

1. What was your initial reaction upon learning John Sweeney was a priest?
2. What are some of the characteristics a priest needs to effectively minister to Catholics today?
3. Were you surprised by anything in the Joe Delgado confession?

4. How did you react to John Sweeney's mystical experience...where he saw himself as God saw him? Were you troubled by it? Were you surprised by how it played out?
5. Read aloud as a group "Uncle's" homily that begins on page 40. What parts of the homily most intrigued you or impacted you?

**VI Part Two Questions** ("The Crisis") - See pages 45 to 272.

1. Did John Sweeney's vocational discussion with his mother about his decision to enter religious life evoke any personal memories about your own vocational decision (to the married or celibate life or even to a particular career choice)?
2. What characteristics of Maggie and Bill Kealy's family do you find prevalent in families in the culture at large?
3. What part of Monsignor Jim Grogan's dinner table discussion with Father Sweeney on the history of the Catholic Church and contraception did you find most interesting? Were any of what Monsignor's comments new to you?
4. In the book, the author reveals the little-known fact that oral contraceptives also frequently work as "abortifacients", bringing about early abortion versus simply "preventing pregnancy". This is a shocking reality to many, when one first hears it. Did you know of this before reading the book? If not, what was your reaction?
5. Bill and Maggie Kealy, in separate meetings with Fr. John, manipulated him during their respective confessions. Why do people manipulate situations to achieve the answers they want (rather than what they need)?
6. Did you find Dr. Koblinski's explanation plausible as to how the secular world outmaneuvered the Catholic Church in introducing, and ultimately mainstreaming, the Pill?
7. How does the way HSN established a beachhead for "soft porn" in the American living room parallel the way the medical community inures the general public to contraception and abortion?
8. What was your initial reaction to Dr. Kallen's disclosure that a Mayo Clinic meta-analysis of all studies revealed that women were 50% more susceptible to developing breast cancer if they used the Pill for several years before their first pregnancy? What do you see as the ramifications of this for our society? Do you think the public would react strongly against this if they understood it ... or turn a blind eye to it, even if it means putting oneself at risk?

9. Do you think Dr. Kallen's challenge to Joe Delgado was fair? ("We're called as faithful Catholics to speak truth to power.") Have you ever been called to do the same?
10. Do you think parishioners today should confront their clergy the way Michael Burns and Joe Delgado did at the parish event, or do you think priests have too much to deal with and should only be witnessed to through our actions?
11. In your opinion, did the "John Paulistas" make the right decision when they abandoned Fr. Sweeney and their own parish for Fr. McGinty, or should they have stayed in their own parish and tried to work for change?
12. Was Drew Avin's statement to Fr. Sweeney that his failure "to trust (the young families) with the truth...left them...spiritually fatherless"...harsh and judgmental or fair and accurate?

**VII Part Three Questions** ("The Charism") - See pages 273 to 394.

1. Michael Burns chose to boldly challenge Richard Kloss about the HSN programming model. Would you have taken a different approach or was this confrontation inevitable?
2. Did Inquirer reporter Sondra Lichtman's indictment of the U.S. Bishop (... "your guys really fell down on the job...not telling the people about the moral and physical dangers of contraception...") surprise you? Was Joe Delgado's defense convincing?
3. Was Michael Burns' argument to Ron Zimmer plausible...that salacious television programming in the home would ultimately eradicate the stage of life known as childhood? Has it proven to be true?
4. In one of his conversations with Sondra Lichtman, Joe comes to see that all people rely on the Catholic Church as the pre-eminent moral voice in the world – to defend the inalienable dignity of the human person. Do you agree or disagree, and why?
5. Father Rick Stuart, one of John Sweeney's classmates, was accused of sexual abuse. His fellow priests appeared to be shell-shocked on their flight to Rome. How do you think the sexual abuse scandal has interiorly affected the tens of thousands of innocent priests?

6. Cardinal Ratzinger quotes Jacques Maritain: priests can only be said to “live in communion” with their flocks to the degree that they “...awaken them, educate them, challenge them...to live what they themselves know to be true and good...” Do you agree? How might a priest today issue such a challenge to his people?
7. What did Pope John Paul II mean when he told Father Sweeney at their private breakfast that “... the fundamental negation the devil wishes to create...is the destruction of family...which is where Man most images Trinitarian Love...”?
8. What did you think of JPII’s assertion that modern Man’s embrace of the symbiotic relationship between “...the illusion on the screen...and the delusion of the Pill...[have] systematically drained America’s “moral energy”? Of what value, if any, is “moral energy” in the life of a people?
9. Rebecca Peterman introduced Michael Burns to Madison Avenue’s adaptation of “The Big Lie”. What was the original “Big Lie” and are their lingering traces of it in our post-modern culture?
10. Did you think Joe Delgado did the right thing when he promised his daughter, Theresa, he would not jeopardize his family...or career...for what he saw as a great moral dilemma in the Pittman Labs archives?
11. Do you accept the “Perfect Storm” sociological arguments advanced by Father Sweeney’s brother priests over dinner in Rome as to why the Catholic Church’s influence has fallen so precipitously over the past 40 years? These arguments (found on pages 386 to 392) included: Conciliar Confusion, American Assimilation, and Doctrinal Dilution.
12. Why do you suppose John Sweeney did not share his transformative experiences in Rome with his brother priests?

#### **VIII Part Four Questions (“Epilogue”) - See pages 395 to 410.**

1. Feeling alone and abandoned in his failure, Michael Burns was greatly consoled when he awoke in the middle of the night, went downstairs, opened the Bible and read: “To the Church of Philadelphia: I know your weaknesses but because you have clung to me I will open a door for you that no one will close...” (Rev 3). Is there a particular verse in Scripture that has ever provided you with such consolation?
2. Do you think Joe and Fran Delgado’s marriage will endure? What do you think they need to do to repair it?

3. Did you find Maggie Kealey's witness to her faith ... heroic? In hindsight, could she have done anything differently to save her child...and her marriage?
4. Do you think demonic oppression...as opposed to demonic possession...is commonly understood? What, if anything, could the Church do to alleviate suffering in families like the Kealey's?
5. Father John Sweeney's final sermon, rooted in the "Bread of Life" discourse, spoke of the "hard sayings" of Jesus. He then offered a litany of those hard sayings to his congregation as they related to our modern culture. He explained that because he was now aware of his personal accountability to bear witness to these "truths" ...he must do so, first, with his own congregation. Do you agree or disagree with this? Was there any part of his sermon you had difficulty with? (Consider reading the homily aloud to your group. See pages ages 404-408.)
6. How do you think Church leaders should present the full truth of Catholic teaching to the faithful, knowing as they do that many today are substantially uninformed and ill-formed?
7. In the final scene it appears John Sweeney is going to get a "second chance" with another young couple; have you ever received what you regarded as a second chance from the Lord?