

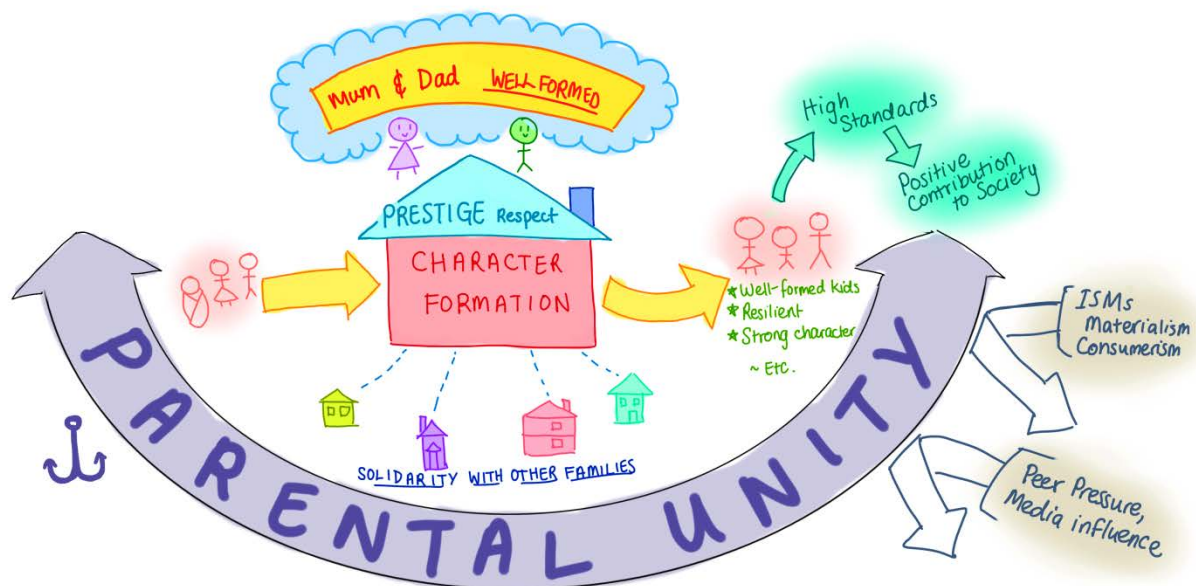
# Parental Unity: Anchor of Family Life

by Benna Abrahan - Masbate

**N**ow, more than ever, the family is in need of united, heroic parents.

The modern family is continuously under attack. From local issues to the global stage, the concept of family is challenged and re-defined. At home, parents and children battle pressing domestic issues: from media's aggressive intrusion in their very own living rooms to the glitzy allure of consumerism pervading in the family members' consciousness. On top of that, the family has to grapple with peer pressure, bullying, attacks on children's sexuality, among others. With these challenges, it is becoming more necessary to create an anchored family life - full of stability, purpose and service.

This paper proposes that the best way to create a stable family life is through parental unity. The article sheds light into the importance of parental unity on the spouses, the parents and children, as well as the family and the whole society. Each relationship is explored. Spouses benefit greatly in their unity and ultimate self-giving to each other. On the other hand, parenting *for character* - parenting that moulds children into responsible adults - is anchored on parental unity; without it, the credibility of the parents' authority is non-existent or hard to gain. With the unity of parents and children brought up well in virtues, such cohesion results in the advancement of society as a whole.



## Unity: To be whole and one

The word *unity* comes from the Latin word *unitas*, from *unus*, meaning 'one.' The Oxford Dictionary defines 'unity' as 'a thing forming a complex whole' or 'the state of forming a complete and harmonious whole.'

On the other hand, the word 'parental' pertains to anything that parents – the mother and father and the husband and wife – do to protect, promote and nurture the unit that they belong to and they have created: the family. The origin of this word comes from the Latin word '*parent*,' which means 'bringing forth,' from the verb '*parere*.'

From these definitions, parental unity may be defined as *the state of relationship between husband and wife that brings to completion the best potential of its members*. If the best potential of family members is achieved, the positive effects of parental unity can be felt beyond the confines of the family. Well-formed families contribute greatly to society. Ultimately then, society derives benefit from the fruits of parental unity.

## In courtship: The discovery of self

When a man and woman come together to marry, it is presumed that they are compatible. Any sensible adult, however, knows that this compatibility has to be gleaned and poked at way before contracting marriage. It is during the vital stage of courtship that the man and woman grow in affection and get better acquainted<sup>1</sup>. It is at this stage that they get the chance to know each other's quirks, temperaments and views. They may not be entirely and

perfectly compatible, but they must be of *one mind* on the fundamental things – that is, that they see their union as a means of bringing out the best in them and their children.

Christianity teaches us that to be the *best* of ourselves is to be *ipse Christus* - to be Christ himself – who gave his whole self, died for us on the cross and merited our salvation. For man, to be *ipse Christus* is to give the other the best of what he has, for his sake, and not expect anything in return. This selflessness is what should drive a man and a woman who are contemplating marriage to take the plunge and believe in a *happy ever after*. Because, only by this total gift of self are we able to go beyond our limitations and live with dignity and be able to serve the other, *in sickness and in health, for richer or for poorer, til death do they part*.

After exchanging "I do's," married life then overtakes. Yes, on some days, it can be *la vie en rose*. But, on most days, it is more a conundrum of juggling work, bringing kids to school on time, balancing money matters, meal preparation and cleaning up mess, among others. It is during these latter scenarios that couples must be reminded of the bigger picture: that married life is a lifetime of service devoted to your other half, to your children and your children's children.

It is certainly not a walk in the park but this spirit of service draws out the happiness of your spouse and your children. Ultimately, it also draws out *your* personal happiness: a happiness that is transformed, deepened and matured, and made permanent through the commitment of marriage<sup>2</sup>.

## The union between husband and wife: The gift of self-giving

*"May heaven grant you in all things your heart's desire – husband, house and a happy peaceful home. There is nothing better in this world than that man and wife should be of one mind." - Homer, The Odyssey, c. 700 BC*

Man is, basically, gregarious. He needs to be with the *herd*. As a social being, he needs to be with others in order to actualize his full capacity. *"It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him."*<sup>3</sup> He is naturally drawn to the opposite sex. It is this attraction that God has invited man and woman to fulfil their creative purpose – the generation and co-authorship of human beings. For God said to them, *"Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it."*<sup>4</sup>

When a man and woman marry, they bring with them their own individuality, family history, attitudes, peculiarities, strengths and weaknesses, views and opinions. In other words, they bring their *whole selves* to the altar of marriage. And yet, despite their differences, the spouses are brought together and are *united* in love. This conjugal love embraces the whole person – from the bodily, emotional, spiritual and supernatural dimensions.

Physical love actualizes the couple's sexual attraction to each other. It is instinctive, intense and highly pleasurable. It is fecund and brings forth children. In turn, this sexual union creates the unit of the 'family.' In marriage alone does this physical love attain its full potential – where sex finds a deep personal connection between two individuals with the fruition of offspring

properly ensconced and protected within the marital bond.<sup>5</sup>

Affective or emotional love explores the whole gamut of the spouses' emotions. Never are the differences between man and woman more glaring than this aspect. Numerous studies have shown that, generally, women display higher sensitivity and emotive capacity; in contrast, men display higher attributes of logical reason and action. However, it is precisely the complementarity of the maleness of men and the femininity of women that brings forth the beautiful creation of natural marriage. With these differences, it is always assuring to the man and the woman that they are loved and accepted, for who they are, with the respect one shows to the other.<sup>6</sup>

Spiritual love is the union of the mind and the heart. Couples must have common principles and ideals in life, and have similar goals that, together, they aspire to reach. They must have a common vision, a mission for which the family will operate steadfastly.<sup>7</sup> The *why* must be clear from the outset, even if the *how* may not be, as of yet.

Supernatural love, on the other hand, allows us to participate in God's love through the demonstration of charity and self-less giving to the other spouse and offspring. Christianity teaches us that this is made possible through the supernatural grace of Christ's love and example, that by dying on the Cross, he has shown us the penultimate sacrifice and charity. Thus, God's love is the apex point of the unity between husband and wife.<sup>8</sup>

St. Paul's address to the Colossians is apt: *"Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness and patience, forbearing one another and, if one has a*

*complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive . . . Wives, be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives and do not be harsh with them."*

These different dimensions of love between husbands and wives must permeate in their relationship. They must know, intuitively, how it works *for* them. It is not easy to love – given our wont to sin and suffering. It is precisely the putting up of a united front, the brave plodding through the overcast days of family life as well as the celebration of bright, sunny days and the endless self-giving of the spouses that make spousal unity truly genuine.

It is this instrument of marriage and gift of self-giving that a stable family is built, a community where parents, children, grandchildren and relatives proliferate and embody love to outer society. The spouses *"initiate and develop this communion of love. By virtue of their pact of love, a man and a woman are no longer two but one and are called to continually grow in communion by being faithful each day to their vows to live a total, reciprocal donation."*<sup>9</sup> This total, reciprocal donation exemplifies the high regard for marriage. It is a profession, a full-time job, and most of all, a vocation. It is the path by which we can achieve our full potential – some say, our perfection; others say, our holiness.

In his book *Covenanted Happiness*, Monsignor Cormac Burke states that, *"Married love is a constant call to self-giving, and that is why, if the challenge it offers is freely answered, it so powerfully leads people to holiness. . . . Such constant self-giving is the way of Christ, who gave himself on the Cross. It is also, paradoxically, the way of happiness."*<sup>10</sup> It is this personal happiness that has been referred to as one which deepens, matures

and is made permanent with personal maturity and the passing of time.



It is the parents who lead by example, nurturing their children with dignity and moulding them into individuals who *"grow up to become competent, responsible, considerate and generous men and women who are committed to live by the principles of integrity. . . ."*<sup>11</sup> - these are the parents who embody the struggle for holiness, and still, chart the path to their personal happiness.

## Parents and children: A mission of love and service

*"The best thing a husband can do for his children is to love their mother."* – Ray Guarendi, author, *Back to the Family*

With the validity of marriage under their belts, parents are able to wield their authority over their children effectively. The authority by self-less, conscientious parents is not based on their *powers* as the adults of the house or as parents to their children, *per se*. Rather, it is the authority that stems



from **respect**. Respect from years-long credibility, consistency and dependability in front of their kids. Others call this **prestige**. The prestige of a good, dependable teacher who makes a kid listen. It is the teacher who has a good track record, of one who is trusted.<sup>12</sup>

It cannot be denied that as parents, they have the responsibility to feed, clothe and provide leisure, shelter and education to their children. But is this everything? If parenting were to be considered a serious business venture where so much is at stake for the future of children, then solely focussing on these basic parental duties is like parental myopia – they do not cover enough of the daunting challenges that the children will face in the future.

**As nurturing parents who desire and actively mould their children into self-giving, responsible adults, they must steer their children early on, unto this path of greatness – the path of service.** These are the parents who lead - *leader parents* and *visionary parents*, as they are called - who look into the future of their children as adults. This is the essence of parenting *for character* – to *sculpt children for life*.<sup>13</sup> They raise adults, not children. Parenting is “*more about preparing children to take control of their own future lives and to connect with others in lifelong relations.*”<sup>14</sup>

Unfortunately, children do not come out of their mother’s womb generous or self-sacrificial. The reality is that they come out inward-looking and selfish. It is thus the parents’ responsibility to *form* them. Or more precisely, *model* to them character, or virtues, as philosophers call them.

Andrew Mullins says, “*Character equals good habits.*”<sup>15</sup> How then do parents model ‘good habits’? By practicing them themselves. They have to lead by example.

Parental unity, in this regard, is thus imperative. Both father and mother must be on board in doing what is good, teaching the kids by example. As great a responsibility parenting is, nothing can be greater than showing the kids a united front in knowing, teaching and doing what is good, day in, day out. **Parenting for character thus hinges on parental unity.**

Imagine how perplexed children can be when mum and dad exhibit conflicting signals or more so, are not even communicating or living with each other. Distraught and conflicted children may not be the proper receptacle for messages of love, happiness, good, justice, etc. for they themselves are not afforded those goodness. Contrast this with the constancy of love, teachings and examples of a united mum and dad who guide, mould and sculpt away at the sharp angles of this piece of marvel that is the child. How truly fascinating is this process of discovery. It is organic, full of vigour and free; never stunted by failures or temporary setbacks. The process never lets its *goal* out of sight. Intelligent and shrewd parents hold the goal firmly, not wavering nor getting distracted with the conveniences of the moment (TV anyone?) or what’s *en vogue* (like relativism and materialism).

How important is this constancy at teaching the good? Because habits are ingrained through repeated practice. Everyday, children form habits, good or bad. It is the parents’ responsibility to weed out the bad from the good.

This is where parental unity becomes crucial – when both mum and dad teach kids perseveringly and firmly to do their chores at home, complete their school assignments on time and teach them good manners by saying *please* and *thank you*. James Stenson refers to this as directed practice where children are taught

“...through specific directed action, to forget about their self-centred interests ...and contribute to the needs and welfare of the family.”<sup>16</sup> How are kids compelled to do what is told them, if they see their mum and dad not in agreement of what needs to be done and how? **Unity is important.**

In addition to modelling and doing good habits, Stenson espouses verbal explanation as a means to **teach, guide** and **encourage** children about good habits that have been practiced by family members. These words will serve to sway their conscience and guide them to distinguish the good and the bad, the just and the unjust, and the right and wrong. It is essential that the parents' voice must be the children's voice of conscience.<sup>17</sup>



It is through the tried and tested way of example, directed practice, verbal explanation and encouragement that character, good habits or virtues are formed. As described by Plato's *Republic* and St. Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologica*, these are the following cardinal virtues:

**Sound judgment.** This is also called prudence or the judgment of conscience. It is the power to make

discernments on the most important distinctions in life: good from evil, truth from falsehood and right from wrong. In determining the true good, a prudent person is also able to determine rightly how best to attain this good.

**Responsibility.** This is also known as justice, to give God and neighbour what is due him. It is the habit of doing our duties, *no matter what*. It is knowing how to respect other people's rights and be thoughtful towards them. It is to abide by the law.

**Fortitude.** This is called courage, perseverance and toughness. It is pursuing the good even to the point of martyrdom or self-denial. It is the *guts* to overcome difficulties, anxieties and personal shortcomings. It is the ability to rely on a lifetime of practice in solving problems.

**Self-mastery.** This is also called temperance. It is the power to say *no* to overindulgence and bad habits. It is controlling our manner of speech and temperament.

**Heart.** The Romans called this magnanimity or *greatness of heart*. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, it goes by the name of charity, compassionate understanding, awareness of others' needs, a spirit of service and sacrificial love. This virtue explains how we give others the best of what we have, for their sake, and not expect anything in return.<sup>18</sup>

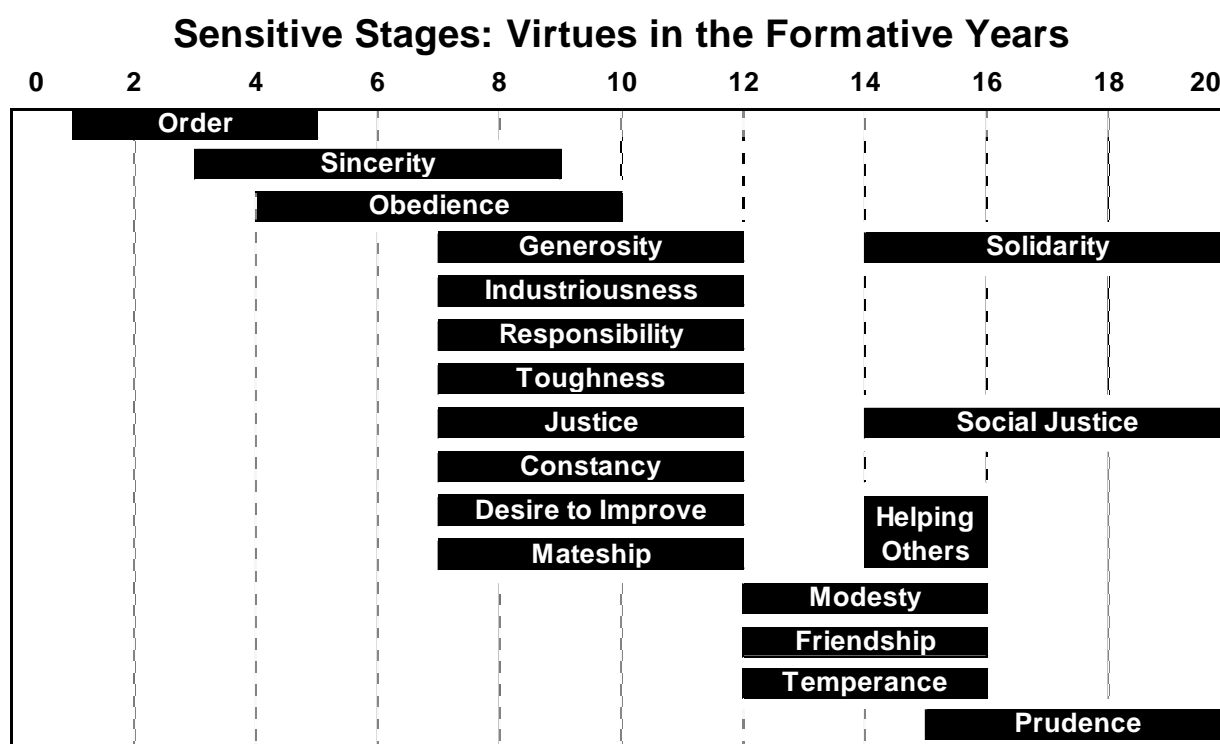
These are the cardinal virtues which we actively desire for our children. Patiently, they must be taught, formed and moulded

at *crucial* moments of a child's life. **Slacking in parenting therefore, is a big no, for time is of the essence.**

For example, a child aged one to five years old must be taught **order** which is a form of self-mastery. Teaching a child to 'pack away' after playing with toys is crucial at the early years of formation. Otherwise, order will become harder for him to practice. Another example is **obedience**. Obeying parents' and older relatives' orders must be taught and explained thoroughly from age four to 10. This is the stage when a child starts to have a mind of his own and tries to

justify his behaviour. It is most important at this stage that the child must accord his parents the respect that is due them. Being disrespectful, whining against being made to do chores and raising his voice should never be tolerated.

As we have seen thus far, parental unity has a large impact on strengthening the married couple's relationship. The effect is also seen in parenting in its vital form – parenting for life, raising responsible adults, adults who give good name to their family.



Source: Corominas, Fernando (2003), *Educar Hoy*

## From family to society: Unity for societal good

As a basic social institution, the family is in a most crucial position to serve society and effect high-impact difference. As years pass, the lives of these upright, young

citizens, under the guidance and tutelage of their parents, are now brought forward as beacons of hope and models of service. The future of society relies on their good examples and deeds.

As young, independent individuals, they are out there, exercising their rights and crusading for matters that are of utmost

importance. Important issues which were taught and discussed by their parents *with* them, within the confines of their homes, are now in the forefront of current events. The issues may be in a different form but the basic fundamental precepts of good versus bad, truth versus falsehood and respecting or denigrating life will always be at the core of issues.

The children's foundation must then be rock-solid. Stenson mentions heart-to-heart talks, stories of heroism and firm corrections that build good judgment, conscience, attitudes and values.<sup>19</sup> Their moral life must be unshakeable and they must be respected for it.

Children must be *in the know* in order for them to play an active role on public discussions. They must educate themselves about the issues that are important to them and their family, and stand firm in their beliefs. Such virtues are so embedded into the children's mind - with years of explanation and providing example by parents - that second-guessing is not possible. They know what their parents' firm convictions are on key societal issues like social justice, poverty, inequality, terrorism, threats on marriage and family, threats on the dignity of life such as abortion and euthanasia, relativism and consumerism, among others.

Having seen the importance of the parents' unity over the family's stance on public issues and the pivotal role it plays in changing the world we live in, it is thus all the more important to nurture and strengthen parental unity.

## The challenges and gifts of parental unity: Practical tips

Some parents are under the illusion that unity means uniformity.<sup>20</sup> While unity means the bringing forth of a complete and harmonious whole, uniformity, on the other hand, means evenness, lack of variation and conformity. At the outset, there may seem to be 'unity' between husband and wife when you don't hear them argue. However, you scratch the surface a bit and you discover that a spouse conforms to the other person's view for fear of arguments. It may also be that one spouse has a domineering personality over the other and that the latter panders to the dominant spouse's views.

But is this really unity? Superficially, yes; but in the long run, spouses can never sustain this kind of evasion at facing the real issues. They can never attain peace of mind, a peace that will only truly come about with the union of hearts and minds of two opposing individuals who have come to realize what the more important objective good is. This process may be arduous, and conflicts may arise. The couples have to understand though, that despite the hardship, they have to persevere in addressing the issues. They have to have openness of mind, humility to understand the other person's views and the courage to jointly formulate solutions. This is unity in action.

Some parents are also prone to *go with the flow*, especially when pressing concerns are pulling their attention. They just shrug off the issues and allow themselves to be steered to wherever the road will lead them. This often happens when parents are pulled apart for attention by their many extra-domestic commitments and by their children's needs. Parents must then ask which is more important: their various commitments or children's needs?

Some parents, by their nature and temperament, shun conflicts. Conflict,



however, is a natural part of the parental relationship. It gives the couple a chance to learn how to communicate effectively and show respect for the other person's views. Communication is the key here. Also, discernment of the issues, especially those that touch on moral dilemmas, is paramount and should not be ignored.

Parental unity cannot just be an ideal. Its benefits are too far-reaching that *the couples have to make it workable between them, for them and their family*. It has to be a daily, continuous effort by the parents.

The parents have to ask themselves if parental unity is visible between the two of them so children can see it. They have to ask themselves, if within their relationship as husband and wife do they show love for the other? Is their affection for their better half brought forth clearly? Do they bring back the romance, *daily*?

The story goes that JRR Tolkien and his wife Edith, married for more than 50 years until their death, always demonstrated their love for one another. Tolkien's biographer Humphrey Carpenter observed: "Those friends who knew Ronald and Edith Tolkien over the years never doubted that there was *deep affection* between them. It was *visible in the small things* . . . and the care in which they chose and wrapped each other's birthday presents . . . . A principal source of happiness to them was their shared love of their family. This bound them together until the end of their lives, and it was perhaps the strongest force in the marriage. They delighted to discuss and mull over every detail of the lives of their children, and later their grandchildren."<sup>21</sup>

Do parents make their love visible, *even in the small things*? Do they delight in talking about their children and planning their future? Do they take pride in the rearing of their children?

Apart from these questions, it will also help to remember these practical tips<sup>22</sup>:



1. **Remember that love is a decision, not a feeling.** It is impossible to keep the warm fuzzy feeling that prevailed during courtship and the first months of marriage. Once kids arrive, it is most likely that the spouses are pressed for time and energy. It is then high time to remember that the relationship with your spouse comes first. If you want the best for your children, it is important to treasure that private time with your spouse.
2. **Don't let the kids rule the house.** If the time and devotion spent for your children has pre-ordained the order of domestic relationship, and has built tension between the spouses, it is time to re-evaluate. The cause might be one of the parents is not exercising effective discipline and the other spouse is either in disagreement or is too busy to care. In terms of discipline, both parents *must* be on the same plane.

3. **Be open with communication, always.** The saying “Communication is key” may be a cliché but they are effective words to live by. Practice them. Whatever is bothering the couple, they have to take it off their chest and be out with it.
4. **When it is time to speak your mind, do so in a gentle way.** Respect. Respect. Respect. It cannot be stressed enough.
5. **Put your spouse first.** Ask yourself, “What does my spouse like most for dinner?” Surprise him or her with a back rub. Having a happy spouse makes you a happy spouse. Let his happiness bring you happiness.
6. **Keep dating each other.** Appoint a day for your date night. Have a parent night where kids are tucked in their beds with the instruction of not disturbing mum and dad having a parent night in the den or in the TV room. Or, go the whole nine yards: flowers, dinner at your favourite restaurant, music, wine, chocolates and walk away with cherished memories.
7. **Have talk time.** Find the time to snuggle and talk with each other daily. It may be about important matters, or just plain nonsensical.
8. **Go to sleep at the same time.** This gives you another opportunity to be closer, either verbally or physically. It is up to the couple.
9. **Be thankful.** Maintain an attitude of gratitude towards the spouse. Ask for help or even if you don’t want to, allow your spouse to help you and say ‘thank you.’
10. **Focus on the positive things in life.** Or, in short, enjoy life.

## Conclusion

For individuals who are called to serve in marriage and family life, parenting is the most fundamental role of their lives. Such a worthy endeavour that it is, it must then be approached with well-informed skills and well-placed intentions. Parental unity is the anchor by which these goals and intentions are attained. It is crucial that the husband and wife be in unity over what matters most to their family – a lifetime of service and love, a life full of heroism. With firm and gentle love, nothing in the outside world, be it threats of grand scale and small, can defeat the *nucleus* of society – the family. With abundance of love, the family will persevere in bringing forth the best potential of each member. And for such family to leave an indelible imprint in society, it will only be a question of when, and not if.

## About the author

*Benna Abrahan-Masbate and her husband, Jorge, are doting parents to two girls and three boys. Working together with other parents, she has been active in organising family-formation activities, such as parenting talks, family club monthly sessions, kids’ sports and family camps. Benna also holds a Master of Law degree from the University of Western Australia.*

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<sup>1</sup> Conversations with Msgr. Escriva, Sinag-tala, No. 105.

<sup>2</sup> Burke, Cormac (2005), *Covenanted Happiness, Love and commitment in marriage*, Scepter Publishers, NY.

<sup>3</sup> Gen 2:18.

<sup>4</sup> Gen 1:28.

<sup>5</sup> Abad, Javier & Fenoy, Eugenio (2002), *Marriage, A path to sanctity*, Sinag-tala Publishers, Manila (p. 46-49).

<sup>6</sup> Ibid (p. 50-51).

<sup>7</sup> Ibid (p. 52-59).

<sup>8</sup> Ibid (p. 59-62).

<sup>9</sup> Ibid (p. 30).

<sup>10</sup> Burke, Cormac (2005), *Covenanted Happiness, Love and commitment in marriage*, Scepter Publishers, NY (p. 200).

<sup>11</sup> Stenson, James (2003), *Compass, A handbook on parent leadership*, Scepter Publishers, NY (p. 9).

<sup>12</sup> Personal notes from J. Arevalo's Parenting Talk for Teenagers, 6 Sep 2013.

<sup>13</sup> Mullins, Andrew (2005), *Parenting for Character, Equipping your child for life*, Finch Publishing, Sydney (p. viii)

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Stenson, James (2003), *Compass, A handbook on parent leadership*, Scepter Publishers, NY (p. 25).

<sup>17</sup> Ibid (p. 26).

<sup>18</sup> Ibid (p.45).

<sup>19</sup> Ibid (p. 28).

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<sup>20</sup> Personal notes from A. Bertino's talk on Family Life, 12 June 2015.

<sup>21</sup> Carpenter, Humphrey (1977), Tolkien: A biography. Ballantine Books, New York (p. 158).

<sup>22</sup> Kerekes, Betsy (2015). Ten Simple Steps to Keeping Romance Alive. Article in aleteia.org (Accessed on 26/06/2015).