Landas 30:1 (2016) 57–62

TESTIMONY OF THE FAITHFUL ON LAY AND FAMILY LIFE*

Cory & Nelson Villafania

Cory: Our little sharing today is a tribute to our parents who taught us first to love God above all else, and then to love our neighbor, especially the poor, with brotherly or sisterly love; the educational institutions that formed us to become Christian disciples wherever we might be; and the Church that has nurtured our faith until the present, as we strive daily to live a "faith that does justice."

Vatican II says:

> … the laity, by their vocation, seek the Kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and by ordering them according to the plan of God. They live in the world, that is, in each and in all of the secular professions and occupations. They live in the ordinary circumstances of family and social life, from which the very web of their existence is woven. They are called there by God, that by exercising their proper function and led by the spirit of the Gospel, they may work for the sanctification of the world from within as a leaven. In this way, they make known Christ to others, especially by the testimony of a life resplendent in faith, hope, and charity.[1]

---

*Delivered on the first day of the LST International Theological Symposium (Henry Lee Irwin Theater, Ateneo de Manila University: March 10, 2016).

[1]Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen gentium* (1964), 31.

Nelson and I did not read Vatican II before we got married in December 1974; it was our parents who reflected its spirit to us: our mothers raised us in prayer, and our fathers showed us the beauty of, and fulfilment in, helping others, especially those in need. As a family, we went regularly to Sunday Mass where we were nourished by the Word of God and by the Body and Blood of Christ. In addition, our growing years were nurtured and influenced by at least five expressions of Christian spirituality: Benedictine, Salesian, Vincentian, Assumption, and Ignatian. The Lord must have thought: "You have enough to raise a Christian family of your own."

We raised our children in family prayer, the Word of God, and the Eucharist. It was not an easy climb, especially when, as we were concentrating on the "Hail Mary," we would see our children fighting, or when, as we were trying to teach them how to reflect on the Word of God, one of them would say, "Mama, may I go to the bathroom?" Enfleshing the Word became better when the children were grown. They have also learned from Jesus' example that we must be neighbor to everyone, especially the disadvantaged.

The Church tells us that the family, aside from being the first school of "discipleship and evangelization,"[2] is the first school of humanity. Indeed, "the future of mankind passes through the family. … [and so] does the future of the Church."[3] We constantly strive to practice tenderness, dialogue, and forgiveness in the family. Nelson and I have always been working parents but we try to make up for our physical absence by embracing our children as often as needed, texting them "I love you" or "Ingat at dasal" (Take care and pray) especially when they go to their workplaces. We encourage them to express their feelings to us or to one another especially in times of conflict, but to do this with tact and respect. We are not always successful, but we try. We have all discovered that our family cannot be truly Christian if we cannot forgive one another from the heart. If we cannot say "sorry" up close

[2]Plenary Council of the Philippines II (PCP II) IV, no. 576.

[3]PCP II IV, no. 597.

and personally, we do it via notes or texting, and for some who truly find it difficult, through little acts of kindness after a misunderstanding.

Since about eight years ago, Nelson has involved himself more in the mission of evangelization by working as a part-time values formation facilitator for Evangelion Foundation, Inc., founded by Fr. Edwin Mercado, an alumnus of San Jose Seminary. I myself had been an educator in the faith, both directly and indirectly, during the 38 years that I was with Assumption College, San Lorenzo. Since my retirement in 2011, I have taught theology to would-be catechists at the Mary Help of Christians College in Canlubang, Laguna where we live. The late Mother Carmen Reyes of the Religious of the Assumption had bequeathed to me two very important questions: "Why do you do what you do? For whom do you do what you do?" I have tried to answer that through the years, but today, my answer is definite: I do what I do because I love God and I, together with my family, would like to take part in the Church's mission of extending His Kingdom where God has called us. I believe that today, I am able to answer those questions in all sincerity because I had the kind of parents that I had, and I heard throughout my formal education words like "Ora et Labora," "Woman of Faith, Woman of Action," "Men and Women for Others," and the like. Our involvement in the Synod last October has fueled our zeal for the Kingdom, as we experienced the universality, the warmth, and the humility of the Church of which we are all members. It has confirmed the way we have tried to raise a truly Christian family and it has encouraged us to be courageous in sharing this with the bigger families: the Church and the world.

Nelson: Last December 15, 2015, Cory and I celebrated our 41st wedding anniversary. So much time has passed since the day we began our long journey to forever … and we're struggling still. The Second Vatican Council emphasized the importance of fostering the dignity of marriage and the family,[4] reiterating the fact that marriage

[4]Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et spes* (1965), ch. 47–52.

is "a community of life and love."[5] Even if we had not read Vatican II before we were married, we knew of these truths from the example of our parents. I came from a large family, having three sisters and seven brothers. My family of origin was far from being an ideal family, but amidst the many challenges in life, and in particular, poverty, my parents gave us two precious gifts: *love* and *faith*. My mother was a public school teacher and my father worked in the field. Aside from prayer and hard work, "malasakit" (self-sacrificing other-centeredness) and "damayan" (solidarity) were very strong family values. Even if the food was just enough for the family, if a relative or a stranger came in hungry, we shared the food. From my family I learned gratitude and generosity, respect, patience, and forgiveness. I have also discovered a sense of self-worth and have come to know the meaning of love and commitment through my parents' example. I can only thank them for guiding us toward greater responsibility and maturity, preparing me for marriage and family life.

As Cory has shared, we tried (and we are still trying) to raise the children in family prayer, the Word of God, and the Eucharist. We also tried to keep the practice of eating our meals together so we could share our stories and promote the "culture of encounter" in the midst of virtual reality. We are not always complete and we are not always successful, but we try ….

The one thing that I feel I have contributed and continue to contribute to our family life is a sense of *sacrifice* in imitation of the Lord Jesus and in union with His Paschal Mystery.

My way of loving the family is to be an example of quiet service, humble endurance of suffering, and forgiveness and loving presence. Unlike Cory, I do not talk much, but together we are there, where we are needed, especially by our children.

Penultimately, Cory and I have realized that the extended family is so often the ordinary means by which many of us, especially in the Philippines, are accompanied through every stage of life. The love

[5] *Gaudium et spes* 48.

given by relatives, particularly the elderly, contribute to the ongoing formation of the family in the faith, in compassion, and in solidarity with our brothers and sisters in the larger family of humankind.

There is so much more that we can share, but perhaps the intervention we made at the Synod last October 2015 will speak for itself. Here it is:

Intervention

We are Nelson and Cory Villafania, retired educators from the Philippines but now more involved in evangelization through values formation seminars, retreat-giving, and education of poor youth to become catechists and religion teachers.

We have been married for 40 years, gifted with five children, two of whom have passed on to the Lord. We have constantly tried to root our marriage and family life in the Word of God, the Eucharist, and family prayer, and we saw the fruits of this daily striving when we lost our eldest son to kidney failure in 2004, and our fourth child to a vehicular accident in 2011. Up until the time of his death, JB, a special child, showed a genuine love for the Eucharist, so that even as his body weakened in pain, he chose to participate in it rather than go home and rest. His favorite t-shirt had the words "God is good all the time."

Seven years later, our other son, NJ, was run over by a jeepney driver who was playing with his cellphone while driving. During our son's wake, we discovered reflection papers written when he was in third year high school and first year college where he said: "What is best, however, is that we nurture our relationship with God daily so that we may really learn how to love Him and not to fear Him as a slave would fear his master. This, I have discovered is the beginning of eternal life. … I belong to God and I am going back to God."

The death of our two sons made the Resurrection of our Lord more real because their stories gave life to our seminar-workshops and retreats. They became, so to speak, our co-facilitators. We grieved their

leaving us, but the way the faith has shaped them and us made it easier for us to let them go and place them in the hands of God where they will be happiest. Our greatest proof of the reality of the Resurrection was the time when the driver who killed NJ asked for forgiveness, and we, by the grace of God, forgave him.

We realize now that we were helped in our grieving by much personal and family prayer, and not so much by what people said to us or did for us but by their just *being there* for us. It was their *presence* that gave us hope. Our priest friends just came one after the other to celebrate the Eucharist, and the religious sisters who were our friends prayed with us. Two busloads of friends and co-workers came, a good number texted us their condolences, two of whom were Cardinal Tagle and Bishop Bacani. More than many words, we feel that we and many of our marginalized countrymen and -women who cannot even afford to buy a coffin for their dead need from the Church the *ministry of presence*. We thank the Holy Father for having set an example of this when he visited the victims of Typhoon Yolanda (international codename Haiyan). His presence in the name of the Lord was a source of new life for them and for all of us. Our deepest gratitude, Your Holiness.