



## Introduction: Between the Heart That Raised Us and the Heart We Chose

No one loves us like our parents. They gave us life, raised us with sacrifice and dreams. And yet, there comes a day when we must say: *“Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh”* (Genesis 2:24). That word, as ancient as Genesis and as revolutionary as the Gospel, throws us into one of the most complex and painful conflicts of the Christian life: when love for our parents comes into tension with fidelity to our spouse.

This article does not aim to blindly take sides between mothers-in-law and wives, nor to caricature the emotional complexities that arise around marriage. On the contrary, we want to offer a pastoral, theological, and practical guide to help those who live this internal struggle between loyalty to their family of origin and the need to build a solid, peaceful, and holy marital unity. How do we honor our parents without jeopardizing our marriage? What does it mean, in practice, for the spouse to be “first”? How can we balance love, respect, boundaries, and fidelity?

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## I. Biblical Foundations: The Commandment to Honor and the Priority of the Marital Bond

From childhood, we are taught the Fourth Commandment: *“Honor your father and your mother”* (Exodus 20:12). This commandment is non-negotiable. It is part of the Decalogue and carries a promise: “that your days may be long in the land.” Jesus himself reaffirmed this commandment (cf. Mt 15:4), lived it in his own flesh, and sanctified it.

But the same Jesus also says some very strong things:

“Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me” (Matthew 10:37).

And even more:



*“If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children... he cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:26).*

This “hate” is not emotional hatred, but a Semitic way of expressing priorities. Christ is telling us that the Kingdom of God—and therefore sacramental commitments—take precedence over all natural bonds.

When one marries in the Lord, one’s primary loyalty is no longer mom or dad, but husband or wife. This change in priority does not eliminate filial love, but rightly orders it. Marriage creates a new “ecclesial cell,” a small domestic church (cf. Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1655). And in that domestic church, the marital bond is not just a contract, but a sacrament—that is, a visible sign of Christ’s love for His Church (cf. Ephesians 5:25–32).

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## II. A Historical Human and Spiritual Conflict

This issue is not new. In all cultures and times, there has been a tension between the family of origin and the new family born of marriage. Scripture is full of examples of parents interfering in the lives of their married children (like Rebekah with Jacob and Esau), or spouses who failed to cut the umbilical cord (like Samson, who did not discern the dangers of maternal counsel).

Christian tradition, from the Church Fathers to the current Magisterium, has emphasized the importance of the “healthy separation” that marriage demands. St. Augustine, for instance, spoke of how marriage transforms loyalties and requires spouses to prioritize mutual unity above all other affections.

In strongly familial cultures such as Mediterranean or Latin American societies, this issue becomes even more pressing. Parents who opine, in-laws who pressure, children who do not know how to say “enough.” All of this creates fertile ground for conflict, resentment, and in many cases, marital breakdown.



### III. Theological Relevance: Marriage as Communion of Persons

The theology of marriage is not based on sentimentalism or romantic idealism, but on a real, concrete, and demanding vocation: to become one flesh, one soul, one will. This requires exclusivity, intimacy, and above all, unwavering loyalty.

*“What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate”  
(Matthew 19:6).*

Here, “man” can also mean the father, the mother, the brother-in-law, or the mother-in-law. Any intrusion that undermines marital unity is separating what God has joined. It is not a matter of rejecting the family of origin, but of setting clear boundaries to protect a greater good: the sacrament of marriage.

The Second Vatican Council reminds us that marriage is not merely a natural institution but a “community of life and love” (*Gaudium et Spes*, 48). This community must be free, mature, and autonomous. A couple that cannot “launch” from their parents will not be able to form a solid community.

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### IV. What If the Parents Interfere Negatively? Keys for Discernment

When parents (or in-laws) become a harmful influence—whether through emotional manipulation, financial control, constant criticism, or undermining the spouse—we are facing a true spiritual challenge. It is not just a psychological matter but also a moral one.

Here are some signs of destructive interference:

- One spouse consistently prioritizes the opinions of their parents over those of their partner.
- There is emotional or financial dependence that hinders free decision-making.
- Parents intervene in the upbringing of children without being invited.
- Emotional alliances are formed between a spouse and their family against the other.



- Physical boundaries are disrespected (unannounced visits, constant calls, invasion of marital space).
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## V. How to Balance Respect for Parents with the Priority of the Spouse? A Practical Guide

### 1. Build your home on the rock

Moving out is not enough. One must sever emotional, financial, or symbolic dependencies that prevent full development of the marriage. The first step is a healthy, not hostile, but firm separation.

### 2. Constant spousal communication

Talk with your spouse about how you feel when there is interference. This is not about blaming, but about building a pastoral response together. Marriage is a strategic alliance. If one of the two yields to external pressure, the fortress weakens.

### 3. Set clear boundaries with charity

"Dad, Mom, we thank you for all you have done for us, but now we will make our decisions as a couple." This phrase may hurt, but it can also save a marriage. Boundaries must be firm yet respectful.

### 4. Do not allow disrespect toward your spouse

No one should speak badly about your husband or wife in your presence. Not your mother, not your father, no one. If you do not stop these attitudes, you are failing in marital fidelity.

### 5. Spiritual discernment and guidance

Seek spiritual guidance from a priest or Christian counselor who can help you discern. Sometimes the dependency is so deep that we don't even notice it.

### 6. Pray for family peace

Change is not always immediate. Often there are deep wounds, fears, insecurities. Pray for



the healing of relationships. Ask God for wisdom and humility.

## **7. Remember: marriage is your primary vocation after baptism**

Your spouse's salvation also depends on your fidelity. Do not sacrifice your marriage on the altar of fear, guilt, or emotional blackmail.

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## **VI. When the Other Doesn't See the Problem: What to Do?**

Many times, the conflict worsens because one of the two does not see the problem. "What's wrong with my mom helping us?", "We've always done things this way", "My family only wants the best." In these cases, arguing is useless. We must invoke God's grace and seek objective allies (a counselor, a spiritual director, a marriage course).

Love demands openness to truth. If your partner refuses to see the conflict, pray that God will open their eyes. In the meantime, act with patience, without resentment, but also without yielding to the destructive.

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## **VII. A Marriage That Honors Parents Through Freedom**

Honoring parents does not mean obeying them for life. It means respecting them, being grateful, caring for them in old age—but from mature freedom. The best tribute we can offer our parents is to build a strong, healthy, fruitful home where everything good they gave us is reflected. And also, where their mistakes are corrected.

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## **Conclusion: "The Two Shall Become One Flesh"**

Marriage is not improvised. It is a vocation lived day by day, in decision-making, in the soul's little battles. Putting the spouse first does not mean betraying the parents, but fulfilling God's plan for marriage.

When family ties pull in opposite directions, when love hurts, when respect becomes



demanding, remember this word of Jesus:

*“Every kingdom divided against itself is laid waste, and a divided household falls” (Luke 11:17).*

Don't let your home collapse due to lack of unity. Be brave. Set boundaries. Pray. Speak. Love in truth. And always remember that conjugal love, when lived in God, is stronger than any external interference.