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## Gabriel Marcel's Creative Fidelity and the Challenges of the Filipino Family

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### Abstract

*This paper attempts to provide Marcelian reflections on the challenges of the Filipino family. The problem is anchored on the question: "How does the philosophy of Gabriel Marcel confront the challenges of the Filipino family?" In order to provide a thorough discussion, the following sub-problems are discussed: 1. What are the challenges of the Filipino family? 2. What are Gabriel Marcel's philosophic grounds in relation to the family? 3. How do Marcelian concepts confront the problems of the Filipino family? In reference to method, this paper is expository and comes with a reconstruction of Gabriel Marcel's philosophy.*

**Keywords:** Creative Fidelity, Constancy, Presence, Challenges, Filipino Family

### Introduction

Marriage is the cornerstone of the Filipino family, and the family is seen as the fundamental unit of society. Primary values, customs, traditions, and character formation are learned and cultivated in the family (Dnes, 2007). The family is a close and typically permanent domestic social group that is linked by blood, marriage, or adoption and shares social and economic duties. The family is regarded as the most significant fundamental group in society. When a child grows and develops, the family is the first immediate group he is exposed to. The family is also the most influential group that the individual has in his life. Since the dawn of time, man tried his very best in order to establish a union of two individuals with the goal of perpetuating life. This union, since then, was recognized by the society and blessed by the elderly. As civilization transitioned to modernity, the sanctity of the family was preserved. Major religions in the world were at the frontlines in safeguarding the value and sanctity of the family.

Traditionally speaking, a family is composed of a father, a mother, and children. In order to have a thorough understanding of what a family is, it is best that the ontos<sup>1</sup> and telos<sup>2</sup> of the family be discussed. From the context of the law, the family starts with marriage. The law protects the married couple. From a legal standpoint, marriage is defined as the union of a man and woman bound by vows in front of an audience or a witness in the hope of starting a family. From this perspective, marriage is recognized by the law and by the social groups – be it religion or cultural groups. When a couple is married, certain protections are enjoyed by the couple. For instance, when one of the spouses gets sick, the medical bill could be shouldered by the other spouse's health insurance.

<sup>1</sup> Ontos, in this context, means the nature of marriage.

<sup>2</sup> Telos means the purpose of marriage.

Another example is inheritance. When one of the couples dies, or both of them die, their property will be inherited by their children. The law recognizes the children as the legitimate heirs. Aside from recognition and acceptance in society, marriage has a legal benefit that the married couple enjoys.

On one hand, moral principles are taught in the primary social group, which, in this case, is the family. Parents play an essential part in the moral training of their children. Parents are expected to be the first teachers, instilling excellent manners and correct behavior in their children. This is the primary moral obligation of parents to their children, and hence, one of the family's telos.

However, marriage and family entail a deep sense of responsibility and close relationships. To relate with the spouse and the children is not only to recognize them as persons and respect them as unique subjects. It involves more than this kind of recognition and respect. Genuine spousal relation is anchored on commitment, constancy, faithfulness, and availability (Cipriani, 2004). These ideas are espoused by the French philosopher Gabriel Marcel.

However, as the Filipino family braves the modern world, challenges that may come in the form of disrespect, adultery, domestic violence, and separation, to name a few, would try to shake or even destroy the foundation of the family. This paper attempts to confront these challenges using Gabriel Marcel's concept of presence, fidelity, constancy, and availability. This paper uses exposition as its method that comes with a critical appreciation and reconstruction of Marcel's thoughts.

## I. The Challenges of the Filipino Family

The modern family is a family that lives separately from the joint family. The modern family embodies economic independence but has, one way or the other, been influenced by the rising features of modern living that may come in the form of a decline in religious control, laxity in relationships, and the affinity towards smaller families. Although living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century has its advantages, the family is not shielded from problems and challenges (Grossi, 2014).

Disrespect, adultery, domestic violence, and marital separation are some of the challenges that a family may face living in the modern world. These challenges are discussed as a result of this.

### Disrespect

Marriage is a partnership entered into with couples in the hopes of establishing a family tied by vows. During the matrimonial ceremony, both spouses uttered vows to each other, indicating that they would be committed to one another. The fulfillment of these vows manifests that these spouses respect one another. Respect serves as the binding force which allows the spouses to develop a sense of trust. However, when one of the spouses does not fulfill the promises being made, it is a manifestation of disrespecting the other spouse. Disrespect comes in many forms. It makes the couples distant from one another. Marital disrespect can lead to a fight. Disrespect may cause couples to ignore one other, from simply cutting out one's spouse when he is speaking to disregarding his request, to constantly doing what he thinks is repugnant, to yelling, to using improper comments. This may cause a cycle of disrespect by making someone feel unappreciated and neglected (Grossi, 2014).

Individual issues such as insecurity, jealousy, and low self-esteem can all contribute to disrespect. People who are not secure with themselves may lash out at their partners as a result of projecting

their anxieties onto them. As a result, there may be a propensity to dominate, manipulate the emotions of others, and violate personal boundaries. Disrespect in a marriage can have severe consequences. It can lead to interpersonal breakdowns, mental suffering, and low self-esteem. Children may absorb the negative behaviors they witness and develop their issues with respect and communication in their future relationships as a result, which can have a significant negative impact. A lack of respect in marriage may lead to a more severe problem, such as adultery.

### Adultery

Adultery is defined as the act of being unfaithful to one's spouse or partner (Grossi, 2014). It is a betrayal of trust and a violation of the sacred vows taken by two people in a committed relationship or marriage. Adultery has a detrimental effect not only on one's spouse but also on family and friends, as it creates a mark that makes the established relationship go awry. Adultery is committed for a number of complex and varied reasons. Some people could feel unloved or mistreated in their existing relationships, while others might just be looking for physical or emotional fulfillment elsewhere. Whatever the motivation, adultery can leave the betrayed partner in a great deal of sorrow and suffering. The impact of adultery can extend beyond individual relationships and affect children, families, and even communities. Children may experience emotional trauma and confusion as a result of their parent's infidelity, and the families and friends of the couple may feel torn between loyalty to one partner or the other (Leckie, 2003).

From a legal standpoint, adultery is a severe breach of trust that can have devastating consequences not only for both parties involved but also for the children. Adultery is a kind of marital misconduct and is punishable by the law. Bigamy is against the law. In some countries, adultery can be used as grounds for divorce, and the offending partner may be required to pay spousal support or give up assets as part of the settlement. Despite the detrimental effects of adultery, some people, nevertheless, commit extramarital affairs. Online infidelity has increased as a result of people finding it more straightforward to communicate with other people outside of their relationships as a result of the development of social media and technology. Even if the desire to cheat could be significant, people must think about the possible outcomes and how it might affect their spouse, marriage, and family.

Adultery is a type of disrespect since the person who commits it disregards the pledges made during the marital ceremony. Adultery ignores the sentiments and plights of one's spouse. Domestic violence may occur as a result of the act of adultery.

### Domestic Violence

When disrespect escalates into a fight, physical harm may be inflicted on one another. The dominant tradition wherein the father is the one who holds authority and power may play towards the act of domestic violence. We cannot deny the fact that, somehow, it is ingrained in the DNA of males that they are stronger by virtue of strength. Men are naturally physically stronger than women. When emotions are heightened, one can do actions that may not correspond to reason. One can inflict physical harm on one's spouse. Domestic violence is the process of inflicting physical violence on one's spouse. However, domestic violence could also be psychological. For instance, a mother, together with her children, may feel the threat of being beaten when the father is around, especially if this has been the case for quite some time. Moreover, emotional trauma also results from domestic violence.

Children who witness domestic abuse have harmful impacts as well. Domestic abuse can cause emotional and developmental difficulties like sadness, anxiety, and behavioral challenges. Children who grow up in families where domestic violence happens are more likely to become victims or abusers later in life (Bhattacharjee, 2016).

One of the biggest challenges in addressing domestic violence is that it often goes unreported. Victims may be afraid to speak out due to fear of retaliation, shame, or a belief that they will not be believed or helped. One of the classic Filipino culture that empowers domestic violence is the cheesy line "I love my partner." Due to reasons of love, domestic violence is never reported and, hence, tolerated by the spouse or even the children. This is unacceptable on any level. However, awareness and self-empowerment are not reflected in the victim, and hence, they become subservient to the dominating spouse. Domestic violence destroys relationships, marriages, and families. One needs to seek professional help if one cannot control one's anger problems. Domestic violence, if left unaddressed, may lead to marital separation.

### **Marital Separation**

When one of the spouses is continually inflicting physical, emotional, or psychological harm on the other spouse, this may escalate to marital separation. Divorce, annulment, or marital separation are legal concepts that break the union of the spouses for many reasons. Adultery is the primary reason why marital separation occurs. When one of the spouses engages in extramarital affairs, this implies a betrayal of trust and fidelity. If adultery is committed multiple times, it is already considered a form of illness, which must be addressed professionally. Marital separation allows the spouses to live separately in order to reflect and re-evaluate the steps being committed.

Another reason for marital separation is domestic violence. When one of the spouses inflicts physical violence on the other, this may lead to marital separation. This does not only affect each of the spouses, but it also affects the family in general. Children may develop trauma because of what has been experienced. Psychological effects could also result in domestic violence. Although there are cases of domestic violence, some of which are left unreported because the family has tolerated it (Bennett, 2017).

However, when the couple decides not to proceed with marital separation and continue the cycle that has been going on with their marriage, this may aggravate into a more severe problem that may come in the form of domestic violence. When physical violence is committed, both parties need to seek professional help.

These are just a few of the many challenges that the family living in contemporary times is facing. Marriage and family life must be taken seriously. There are no undo's or redo's when things go differently than they are planned to be. However, no matter how difficult being married or having a family may seem, Gabriel Marcel's philosophical thoughts on the family may help confront these challenges.

However, even if the majority of the countries in the world already have laws on divorce, the Philippines, being a Catholic country, remains committed to a non-divorce law standpoint. Nevertheless, the Philippines has laws on annulment from which its provisions safeguard both parties.

## **II. Gabriel Marcel on the Family**

Given the challenges that a family may face, Gabriel Marcel provides philosophical groundings on how people, specifically couples, relate to one another. Marcel argued that "to relate with a fellow human being is not only to recognize him as a person and respect him as a unique subject, rather, it entails more than this awareness and respect" (Marcel, 2004). For Marcel, genuine relation, and in this context, spousal relation, is anchored on commitment, availability, presence, and fidelity (Marcel, 2004). These concepts could espouse a renewal of the couple's vows in order to safeguard the sanctity of marriage and family, thus providing a framework for addressing the challenges enumerated above.

### **Fidelity and Presence**

Fidelity is often associated with faithfulness, and faithfulness is firm adherence to the commitment made during the matrimonial rites. Fidelity and commitment are linked together and may be used interchangeably. Fidelity is the state or quality of being loyal to one's spouse, refraining from engaging in adultery, or falling in love with another person. Fidelity entails being true and fulfilling one's vows made during the rites of marriage. Marcel posed reflective questions such as "How does one become faithful and committed?" "What is the meaning of fidelity?" and "Can we always remain faithful to our spouse?" to name a few (Marcel, 2004).

A friend or a lover is faithful if he or she will remain committed to the promises made over time. He or she is faithful if he or she remains the same person, and his or her loyalty or love will not change over time. Remaining the same person means that he or she will still be the same person even after a couple of years or even a decade. Fidelity means being constant. However, what is constancy? Marcel introduced the concept of presence as he explained the meaning of constancy. Marcel (2004) said:

I do not want to imply that there is an opposition between constancy and presence, for this would be absurd. However, constancy, when compared with presence, exhibits a characteristic that is to some extent formal; it may even be said (and this is a more accurate description) that I am constant for myself, in my regard, for my purpose, --. In contrast, I am present for the other and, more precisely, for thou. I can easily imagine a man who assures me in the best of faith that his inner feelings or dispositions in my regard have not altered; to a certain extent, I will believe him, but if I notice that he was not there in a particular circumstance when his friendship would have been of value to me, I will hesitate to refer to his fidelity. Of course, presence is not to be construed here as externally manifesting oneself to the other, but rather as involving a quality which cannot be so easily described in objective terms, of making me feel that he is with me.

When we regard someone as a faithful friend or a lover, it means that he or she does not fail to extend help whenever the situation calls for it. That friend or lover does not abandon us when the worst comes to worst. He or she stands by us regardless of the situation. To be present to a lover means that one's inner feelings, intentions, or disposition will remain the same and will not change over time. However, one may ask, "What if one is not there at the moment his presence is needed?" Presence should not be

understood as mere physical presence. A parent fulfills his duty to his child even if he is not always physically present. Presence involves making the friend or the lover feel secure even if one is not beside the other physically. The mark of presence is a mutual tie towards the other. Constancy allows the other to feel the support, love, and care he needs. Marcel (2004) said:

It should be noted that a being who is constant can make me see that he forces himself not to change, that he makes it a duty not to exhibit indifference on a particular occasion when he knows that I am counting on him; he can make it a point of honor to fulfill his obligations to me down to the last detail; and in such case, as I indicated earlier, his constancy is quite clearly based on an idea he has formed of himself and which does not wish to be unworthy of. However, if his behavior really gives me the feeling that he has shown sympathy in such-and-such a way "for conscience's sake," I shall say of him that his behavior has been beyond reproach, that he has been absolutely correct.

One way of looking at fidelity as constancy is through the fulfillment of one's duty or obligation. One could make efforts to bring material and emotional support to the other. One could be standing beside the other when the other needs him the most. However, for Marcel, presence must transcend beyond duty or obligation because if one's duty or obligation is not present, then one will no longer be present. Marcel (2004) said:

if I will be constant, or if I am careful to fulfill certain obligations, I can and almost inescapably seem to myself to be a faithful friend of X. But how does the situation seem to X?" Assuming that X learns in some way or other that I have conscientiously behaved towards him, he will likely release me from this obligation at least in his conscience; there is even a possibility that he will say to me with an intonation that we can have infinite variations: "Do not think you are obligated to..."

For example, in a family, when the children become adults, then it is no longer the duty of the parents to support them. However, if the parents feel that their duty is fulfilled, their presence is still optional.

For Gabriel Marcel, genuine fidelity must be based on spontaneity. He said: "for fidelity as such can only be appreciated by the person to whom it is pledged if it offers an essential element of spontaneity, itself radically independent of the will" (Marcel, 2004). Faithfulness should not be coercive; instead, it must be based on our will – a pure spontaneity. For example, if one gives a gift, it must be because he is not obligated to give one, but it must be given freely rather than as a burden.

The pledge of fidelity is based on inner disposition. However, dispositions can change. One may feel inspired or loved today. Hence, we may pledge fidelity. We may make promises when we are in a good mood. However, dispositions may change as time goes by. Inner dispositions may change due to many factors. Marcel said: "Can I affirm that the disposition which I just have at the moment that I commit myself will not alter later on?" (Marcel, 2004). This then leads to the question of constancy and fidelity. How does one assure or guarantee that the pledge of fidelity will not change? Marcel responds to this question through *creative fidelity*.

### **Creative Fidelity**

*Creative fidelity* is based on two acts, one of which rests on the initiative and the response of the other. The first act is to commit to the other without questioning or doubting our future dispositions (Marcel, 2004). The second act is the response of the other for the commitment we have made (Marcel, 2004). The promise or commitment on our part implies that we will not put our future disposition into question. However, we acknowledge that there might be a possibility of conflict between what we ought to do and what we feel. If this situation arises, then our commitment is at risk. For example, in the case of pre-nuptial, parties are both presented with terms and conditions should the marriage fail. For many, this is considered as the "fail safe" or backup plan should there be divorce in marriage. This is not creative fidelity. For it to be called such, it must be based on spontaneity.

However, there will always be some doubts or questions about commitment. In matrimonial ceremonies, when the groom and bride say "I do" in their vows, they commit to one another. However, there is even the slightest possibility that their marriage will encounter difficulties and challenges in the future. Although words can be assuring, they are not enough to remove the cloud of doubts that the commitment may not be shaken. However, to make this commitment solid and unshakable, Marcel pointed out that commitment must be based on creativity and fidelity. *Creative fidelity* allows each spouse to create themselves into better persons to meet the demands of fidelity.

Moreover, commitment must be infused with hope. Since we do not hold the hands of time and we do not know what the future holds, we can only hope. Hope allows the belief in someone. Thus, fidelity is possible because of faith. We invoke our hope, and we also invoke the response of the other.

However, how can fidelity be creative? An act of admiration, friendship, or love can be considered a creative act. However, to live fully is to admire, love, and establish relations with others. The idea of creative fidelity involves committing to acts that will draw us closer to the person we are committed to. It also entails a respect for the other. Self-love, complacency, self-satisfaction, and even self-angerment may hinder and destroy creative activities. The concept of *creative fidelity* is crucial if one wishes to achieve a more profound sense of self. For Marcel, "it is real fidelity only when it is truly creative" (Marcel, 2004). Thus, *creative fidelity* is fidelity that drives the self to create itself in order to meet the demands of fidelity (Marcel, 2004).

### **Availability**

Marcel relates *creative fidelity* to a fundamental concept – the concept of availability. If there is an assurance of fidelity, it is because it is interlinked with availability. Being available means putting ourselves at the disposal of the other anytime the other requires us. We can retain openness and permeability through creative faithfulness. It enables us to stay open to the other. Being creative is making yourself open to others. However, what does it mean to be available? What is the very essence of availability?

Availability refers to our readiness to stay open to the other and to the other's influence and demands. For Marcel, availability is understood with practical considerations. When one is available in the practical sense, it means that he is ready to be used by the other as a tool and be ready for possible demands or requests. One is also available when he has yet to make prior commitments. Hence, when someone is available, we could have him at our disposal. It

means that we can ask him to do something for us. For Marcel, availability does not entail being passively utilized by the other person but rather responding to the other's wants in total freedom. Being available is being open to an appeal.

However, for Marcel, availability is related to the claim of another person to someone rather than a commitment in the future. Being available to someone includes a presence that suggests complete availability. Absolute availability is defined as "an unconditional readiness to make the appropriate response" - that we should always be there, not necessarily physically, when the other needs us. The connection with the other is entailed by availability and presence. Communion is possible because we can share ourselves with others. "In sickness and In health," the couples must be available to one another because this is the essence of their commitment to one another. When problems arise, they must face them together and not abandon each other. Addressing the problem must be done as a couple because the couple is one.

### III. Gabriel Marcel on the Challenges of the Filipino Family

The Filipino family life may come with difficulties and challenges as time goes by. Not everything is about rainbows and butterflies. There will be days when things go differently than we planned them to be. Be that as it may seem, we must not give up on our families because whether we like it or not, we are bound with them for life. Problems may come and go, but they leave a scar that could either break us or make us stronger. When a person starts living as a married man, there are commitments, duties, and responsibilities to be upheld. However, due to the worldlines and susceptibility to challenges, we may neglect some of these duties and responsibilities and hurt our family in the process.

Entering married life and having a family is more challenging than eating a piece of cake. There are commitments we have to make and limitations that we have to remember. It is for this reason that we must take marriage and family seriously. It starts with discernment prior to marriage. The courting stage allows us to better know and understand our potential spouse. When we are confident about what we feel towards the other, then we may proceed with marriage. However, we have to understand that in marriage, we become one with our spouse. The individuality is subsumed as it allows the emergence of the "I-spouse" duality as one entity. After marriage, the "honeymoon stage" comes in, where the couple feels loved and secure. However, as time goes by, the so-called honeymoon stage may go away. If one neglects his commitment and duties to his spouse, challenges that come in the form of disrespect, adultery, domestic violence, and separation may arise.

Gabriel Marcel offers ways to prevent these from happening in the future. His concept of fidelity allows us to be accurate and faithful to our commitments and vows we made during the matrimonial rites. Being faithful to one's spouse is imperative in marriage. However, fidelity must come with presence. We must always let our spouse feel our presence, especially in times of need. Presence must not always be in terms of physical or material form. We have to assure our spouses that we are just here for them. What is essential is that we are ready to respond to the needs of our spouse. Presence could also take the form of emotional and moral support. When problems arise in the workplace, for example, we need someone to listen to our grievances. Thus, the presence of the other is required. The ability to listen to someone who has experienced a

bad day implies support. Presence also implies availability. We must assure our spouse that we are always at their disposal whenever possible. Availability also does not mean physical presence only. In modern times, technological advancements have made it possible for families to "be available" even if they are on the other side of the globe.

Commitment, presence, fidelity, and availability allows us to show how vital our spouse and our families are. By committing to our vows, duties, obligations, and responsibilities, we uphold the promises we made during the wedding. Fidelity allows us to respect the being of our spouse (Marcel, 2004). Our presence and availability create a significant impact on others, especially when they need us the most. Gabriel Marcel provided us with ways to safeguard, value, and strengthen family bonds. All we have to do is to make sure that our dispositions will not change regardless of the problems we may face.

Finally, Marcel's *creative fidelity* allows us to continually create ourselves in order to meet the demands of fidelity and, thus, maintain a happy and healthy relationship. With creative fidelity, we could avoid disrespect that could result in adultery that could further escalate into domestic violence and, finally, separation.

### IV. Conclusion

Marriage and family life are serious matters since they involve people's lives. In the familial circle, one might be formed or shattered. When deciding to start a family, there are several factors to consider. Before committing to family life, one must plan ahead of time. Couples begin by courting. It is during this period that they discover the uniqueness of the other. The couple gradually got to know each other. Courtship must be time-consuming. Love must be patient. It must not be pushed because everything about one's partner is learned at this time. When a couple is overly hasty and decides to marry without knowing one other, this might lead to problems later on.

In the Filipino family, moral values are first learned by the children. Parents have the natural responsibility to nurture their children. Parents' involvement plays a crucial role in the development of the children. For instance, one must attend the activities in the school for the children. It is indeed true that a career is essential, but it must uphold the fact that you have children to take care of. The reason why one is working is because one needs to provide the love and support the children need. One has to prioritize the family despite the difficulties encountered in one's career. This is the whole package of marriage and family life.

Gabriel Marcel's thoughts on fidelity, constancy, availability, and presence are seen in the couples as they brave each day. Indeed, Marcel provided a framework on how the couples may continue creating themselves in order to meet the demands of fidelity. The couples show that they are always available whenever the time calls for them to support one another. Once in a while, challenges may come, but these challenges are also easily overcome as they are faithful, constant, available, and present all the time.

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