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ON SUNDAY

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MORAL MATTERS

February 14th: the day we mark the moments we became parents

OUR eldest was born ten years ago on St Valentine's Day. That day, universally dedicated to romantic love, was his due date. That he arrived on time was, for me, a sign that this gorgeous child was always meant to be.

I still remember every detail of that night: the clothes I wore, the book I read to pass the hours, the feeling of helplessness. I recall Mrs Dooley telling him not to be afraid, that everything was ready and that he would be welcomed into this world with boundless love. And then, as he was placed in his mother's arms, I saw my future as a father.

We have not celebrated Valentine's in a decade. February 14 is our son's birthday, an occasion to give thanks for him and all the blessings he has brought to our lives.

It is also a day to mark the moment we became parents.

As I gazed in awe at my wife and her newborn, I did not know where my journey as a father would lead me. Would I be up to the task? Would I have the energy and the wherewithal to raise him up as he deserved?

A decade down the road, a decade during which our firstborn became the eldest of three, I am still learning on the job. I am still discovering the joys and trials of fatherhood.

It has been the most beautiful experience of my life yet it is not without its challenges.

My boys give colour and meaning to my life. They have forced me to confront things in myself that I would have otherwise ignored. In so doing, they have made me into a far better person.

My decade as a father has taught me many things about life, love and the human heart. It has proved beyond doubt that society requires strong and loving families if it is to endure. It has also taught me that fatherhood is a lifelong vocation that demands unwavering dedication.

In the life of any child, nothing compares to a mother's love. Her comforting touch, endless sacrifices and ceaseless affection mean everything to her children. Without those precious things, no child could flourish beyond the womb.

In the beginning, as mother bonds with baby, it is hard for fathers to find a role. Eventually, however, you discover that your place is to provide a sense of security and safety. Your primary calling is that of moral role model to your children.

Becoming a father is the easy part. Being a father is, however, something much harder. It involves sacrificing everything for their good. It means being there to comfort, console and, when necessary, to correct.

I am by no means the perfect father.

I am still a novice with much to learn. However, I do know that children need their father's love.

In everything, show them love and they will rise to the heights. Treat them with respect and they will far exceed your expectations. And if you must criticise, never do so by dragging them down. Rather, raise them up by encouraging them to do what is right.

If there is one big lesson I have learned over the past decade, it is that children notice everything their father does. Boys, especially, seek to emulate their father's example. That is why we must always behave as we would wish them to.

Children learn character from their father. When I reveal my flaws, I can see a negative impact on their personalities. For their sake, this means trying hard to keep visible the better angels of my nature.

It also means setting boundaries to their bad behaviour. Children need correction if they are to thrive. Without virtue and good manners, they will become strangers to themselves and to society.

Correction, however, should never involve cruelty. A father's authority is never compromised by firmly explaining why a certain action is wrong. If anything, his children will learn to respect the fact that, in some things at least, dad knows best.

SHE held him in her hands, a beautiful bundle of love. Like all new parents, we did not know what lay ahead. What we did know was that he owned our hearts and that was enough to see us through.

Ten years of highs and lows, mistakes and mayhem, laughter and tears. Ten years of fatherhood, of being with my boys when they soar and when they fall, when they sleep and when they wake.

A decade of twists and turns, in and outs, ups and downs.

Looking back, there are many things I could have done differently. There are many things I regret and which, if I had a second chance, I would change. That, however, is the nature of every father's life. We do our best and, if we make mistakes, we try to do better next time.

Sitting by her bedside on that cold morning was a man who had just become a father. Now ten years older, he has some idea of what fatherhood entails. It is challenging, demanding and, at times, heart-breaking.

It is, however, no less beautiful, rewarding and inspiring. To have journeyed through the years with beings so loving and adorable is a priceless benediction.

Now you know why I don't consider it a coincidence that I became a father on the feast of St Valentine.