

The View from the Summit

Homily for August 22, 2021

We live in a time where there are very different understandings of marriage and indeed in law marriage has been broadened to include same-sex and gender varied unions. Until recently the official documentation from the Alberta Government categorized the couple marrying as “the bride”: and “the groom”. Now the form indicates “spouse 1” and “spouse 2”.

I had a couple approach me last summer where one partner identified with a gender fluid pronoun. This couple requested to be married at St. Peter’s. We were able to have a respectful conversation where I encouraged them to consider another avenue for affirming their commitment and love for each other by choosing a civil union. They agreed with me that this would be the best avenue for them and thankfully we concluded our conversation on amicable terms.

Within the context of our democracy, allowing people this freedom to choose to be legally committed to one another in a binding relationship is permitted in law. This is a legal marriage; and in Canada 2021 this can be a same-sex, varied gender, or heterosexual union. Within the Catholic Church marriage is both legal but it is also sacramental. It is the sacramental understanding that sets the Church’s teaching on marriage in theological language and affirms that it is between one man and woman for life. This is very different from a legal and even social understanding of marriage current in society today.

This is not something that is only a contemporary distinction. In the world of St. Paul’s day, especially in cities like Ephesus, which was a Provincial Capital of the Roman Empire legal marriage was often understood this way:

We have wives to bear us children and mistresses we keep for the sake of our pleasure.

Wives were seen as serving a certain function and utilitarian purpose, childbearing. It was not uncommon for men to have other women with whom they had romantic/sexual relations. In Ephesians Paul presents a view of marriage that was different to the legal norms of his generation just as they differentiate from the modern definitions of marriage gaining greater acceptance and practice today.

We need to approach this reading in Ephesians 5 like approaching a hike up a steep trail. If we stay at the bottom of the mountain, we will not get the beautiful vistas only visible from the summit. When we summit this text, we will have a view of sacramental marriage that is breathtaking. St. Paul celebrates the equal dignity and complementarity of husbands and wives.

As we head towards the summit, you will notice first there is the theme of subordination. We may have a negative view of this word, where the person who is subordinate is being dominated and ruled by the other. But this is not what St. Paul means at all. Indeed, as we start out on the trail, we notice this marker:

Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ.¹

The sacramental understanding of marriage is that there is a focus on mutual submission that looks different for the wife from the husband, as I will explain in a minute. Paul is clear the husband is not superior and the wife inferior. They are equal in dignity which was very different from the common view I quoted a minute ago.

What we now see as we continue our ascent of Mount Ephesus is how the complementarity of this love is expressed. The wife's love is to be a subordinate love and the husband's a sacrificial love.

Listen again to what St Paul says about the wife's subordinate love.

²² Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord. ²³ For the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the church, the body of which he is the Savior. ² Just as the church is subject to Christ, so also wives ought to be, in everything, to their husbands. ³

The first thing Paul says to Christian wives is that they are to be submissive, or subject, to their husbands as to the Lord. Now what does that mean? Many people assume that what Paul means here is that the wife is inferior, but that is simply an erroneous reading. The word subordinate means to be “ordered under”. It is the same word that is used in Luke 2.51 where Luke describes Jesus' relationship to Mary and Joseph. There we read:

Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth and was obedient to them.⁴

The word translated “obedient” in Luke is the same Greek word, (the language of the New Testament) translated by the word “subject” in Ephesians.

Now what does that mean? Jesus obeyed His mother and father. He respected His mother and father as mother and father. Does Luke mean that Jesus was inferior to Mary and Joseph when he says that Jesus was subordinate to Mary and Joseph? Please say no. Alright, good. No — that's right. Jesus is not inferior to Mary and Joseph. Mary and Joseph, however holy they are, are mere creatures. Jesus is the creator become man. He's God made flesh. He's the word incarnate. He is infinitely superior to either Mary or Joseph, but within the relationship of their human family, he willingly subordinates Himself — or is submissive — to Joseph and Mary, to the will of Joseph and the will of Mary as His human parents.

¹ [*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*](#). (1989). (Eph 5:21). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

² [*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*](#). (1989). (Eph 5:22–23). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

³ [*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*](#). (1989). (Eph 5:24). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

⁴ [*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*](#). (1989). (Lk 2:51). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

So, within the context of Paul's text, a subordinate love is a love that is truly respectful and honouring of the husband, the way the Christian is to be honouring and respectful of the Lord, and the way Jesus was honouring and respectful towards Mary and Joseph.

When we look to the way the husband is to be subject to his wife, it is with a sacrificial love. That word used here for love, is agape, the love of God. What a different view of the relationship the husband is to have towards his wife than the quip:

We have wives to bear us children and mistresses we keep for the sake of our pleasure.

Paul says that the husband's love for his wife is to be for her sanctification, and that he is to love her in such a way to nourish and tenderly care for her. The husband's love for his wife is to be a tangible embodiment of the incarnation.

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, ²⁶ in order to make her holy by cleansing her with the washing of water by the word, ²⁷ so as to present the church to himself in splendor, without a spot or wrinkle or anything of the kind— yes, so that she may be holy and without blemish.

Notice that Paul wants us to see that when husbands and wives love each in mutual subjection one to the other, their love can be ordered like how in the body the head is related to the heart. Back in 1930 Pope Pius XI wrote an encyclical on Christian Marriage. He wrote:

St. Paul's teaching affirms that if the heart is separated from the head to the great detriment of the whole body and the proximate danger of ruin. For if the man is the head, the woman is the heart, and as he occupies the chief place in ruling, so she may and ought to claim for herself the chief place in love.

It's a beautiful, powerful image, because if you look at the human body, which is more important, the head or the heart? Well, they're both important. If you cut off the head, the person dies. If you cut out the heart, same end, same effect — death. The body can't live without the head or the heart. They're equally crucial to the life of the body. And so, the image that he gives for the Christian home is of the husband having the chief place in leading and the wife having the chief place in loving.

This is the view from the summit that St. Paul leads us to in this expression of the theology of Christian marriage. This the sacramental meaning of marriage by which husband and wife are learning the way of mutual submission, that has as its source, their reverence for Jesus.

So while the legal definition of marriage can incorporate various pairings in Canada in 2021, the Sacramental understanding of marriage is shaped by God's revealed word and is no where more clearly expressed than in Ephesians 5.