

The Mission of Marriage.

Homily for October 25th 2016
Ephesians 5:21-33

Today we have one of the more challenging passages to interpret from St. Paul's writings. When heard superficially it suggests there is an inequality in marriage, where the wife is to be at her husband's beck and call, dominated by him. This is the problematic verse:

As the Church is subject to Christ, so let wives also be subject in everything to their husbands.

In order to understand this verse we need to step back and hear it in the larger context. The passage begins with this call to mutual submission.

Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ.

In marriage there is to be a mutual submission.

Now think of this word "submission".

Sub means "under" and "mission" means "to send". In a Catholic marriage, both husband and wife are under another. Who is that other? Jesus Christ. They are under his authority. He is the one who sends them, through the sacrament of marriage on a mission. What is that mission? On their wedding day they are sent into the world by Jesus to live a life that is a reflection of Jesus' relationship to the Church. That is why St. Paul writes:

This is a great mystery, and I mean in reference to Christ and the Church;¹

Out of reverence for Jesus they are to live in submission to each other so as to reflect Jesus' relationship to the Church.

In the words that follow St. Paul explains what this means relationally in marriage.

We could phrase Paul's directions towards the wife in this way. Wives live respectfully with your husbands. That is, wives be attentive to your husbands so that you will honour your husband's opinions. You are to live thoughtfully in relation to what your husband says. This, after all, is how the disciples of Jesus lived in relation to him. They listened attentively to him and when they didn't understand him they asked for clarification.

Paul is therefore saying something like:

¹ *The Holy Bible*. (2006). (Revised Standard Version; Second Catholic Edition, Eph 5:32). San Francisco: Ignatius Press.

Wives be respectful about your husband's understanding of the mission you share as a couple and as a family.

Now this implies of course that the husband is actively engaged in his concern for the marital relationship and family. This therefore calls for an attention to home life, that, at times, husbands and fathers neglect.

This is not a text at all supportive of the idea that husbands are to dictate what happens in the home. It does not in any way endorse the principle of domestic domination on the part of the husband in relation to his wife. Rather there is to be a deep and thoughtful interaction whereby the wife respects her husband's caring leadership so that their mutual submission to Christ can be fulfilled.

Husbands are also called to share in this mission in a particular way. They are to so honour their wives that the beloved experiences what it means to be loved sacrificially and genuinely. This means that wives will increasingly experience the sense of being cherished by their husbands

A husband is called to love his wife as Christ loves the Church! And how does Christ love the Church? He loves Her with a sacrificial love. And this must be the husband's love for his wife. It must never be a selfish love. Christ loved the Church, not that the Church might do things for Him, but that He might do things for the Church. A husband who is learning the way of Christ-like attentiveness towards his wife will in turn experience her respectful attentiveness towards him.

When this is happening in a marriage, then increasingly husbands and wives will be living in mutual submission to each other.

The role of husband and wife is not about competing with one another. It is about complementing one another! Such a marriage will be one where out of reverence for Christ they have a deepening reverence for each other. To revere each other in marriage is to esteem and value each other. A wife who is learning to revere her husband will show him respect. A husband who is learning to revere his wife will cherish and love her with a sacrificial caring love.

This is God's purpose for marriage. It is an ideal that can only be fulfilled when both husband and wife understand that Jesus sends them on mission.

May those who are married grow in mutual submission of our reverence for Christ and one another.