

**MUTUAL
SUBMISSION**

by

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THEO 624 Christian Marriage

And the Family

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This paper is written as a homily/synthetic reflection paper. The theme of the paper is mutual submission as found in Ephesians 5:21-33. The readings for the Mass are Genesis 2:18-24, the Responsorial Psalm will be Ps 33:12, 18, 20-21, 22. The second reading will be Ephesians 5:2a, 21-33, and the Gospel reading is John 15:12-16.

Many people are familiar with this reading from Ephesians but, unfortunately, they are only familiar with the seven words of “wives should be subordinate to their husbands.” We must be wary of this, for it robs scripture of its true meaning. There are 226 other words in the passage that are absolutely necessary to properly understand the passage. We do not need to look far to begin to better understand the context. For the following line tells us “Husbands, love your wives” bringing the relationship to a two-way street where both spouses are called to treat the other in a specific way. Yet, they are not called to treat each other the same way. Should not wives love their husbands? Should not husbands obey their wives? Yes, and we see this reflected in our Gospel reading when Jesus says

“This is my commandment: love one another as I love you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you” (John 15:12b-14).

There are two relevant themes for us in this passage. First, which I will discuss in a moment, to what extent is one called to love of their spouse? In the second theme, Jesus tells us if we love him, we will obey him. Thus, if you love your spouse, you will be obedient to them. The Book of Wisdom reads, “love means the keeping of her law” (Wis 6:18). Therefore, by being obedient wives are showing their love for their husband. We must also note that in both *John* and *Wisdom*, love leads to obedience, not the other way around, for love is primary.

This passage from Ephesians portrays human nature. Women tend to be more emotional; seeking love, thus the husband is called to love his wife. Men seek respect; thus their wives as

called to be obedient as a sign of respect for her husband's autonomy. In doing so, each spouse receives what they want, love and respect¹.

Nonetheless, when it puts man as the head of the family, Ephesians is reflective of the patriarchal society in which it is written, thus treating the woman as submissive. Ephesians compares the marital relationship to the relationship of Christ and the Church. Christ as the bridegroom has taken the Church as his bride. So, as the Church is subordinate to Christ, her groom, so shall the wife be obedient to her husband. Yet, we cannot forget the opening or passage from Ephesians tells us "Be subordinate to one another out of reverence for Christ" (5:21). It is not just the woman who is to be subordinate to the man but the man should also be subordinate to his wife. The husband is to imitate Christ who says himself that he came not be served but to serve². Christ humbles himself before his spouse. How can two parties be submissive to one another? Marriage in this perspective is to be a *mutual submission* and a *total giving* of one's self to the other. In recognizing this, we bring equality to the marital relationship.

So each of you is to love the other and be submissive to the other. How far should your love go? Again, we look to Christ for our model, "Christ loved the church and handed himself over for her" (5:25b). As today's Gospel tells us, "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends" (John 15:13). Christ's love for us is the *sacrificial* love of the cross. This is the love Christ continues to have for his *bride*, the Church. Does the Church, as a human institution have faults? Yes. Yet, as Christ has totally dedicated himself to the Church, he does not leave the relationship because of the Church's faults. Rather, he continues in his relationship to the Church because he sees it as an indissoluble relationship founded on love. If Christ's

¹ We must caution against stereotyping. While psychologists support the description of men and women given here, it is only used as a typical behavior and not a definitive statement.

² Mk 10:45, Mt 20:28.

relationship to the Church is indissoluble, so too is the marital bond indissoluble as it mirrors this relationship. If we do not want Christ to desert the Church because of its faults, spouses must be willing to accept each other's faults.

Is Christ proposing a new model for marriage in this? In one sense, Jesus institutes nothing new but rather he simply restores what was meant to be. In his teachings on divorce, Jesus refers to the proper order of marriage as having its origins in the creation story³. Yet, Jesus gives us a new perspective of marriage. As I already mentioned, Jesus describes himself as the bridegroom and the church as his bride⁴. Therefore, marriage is viewed in light of the relationship of Jesus and the Church. And in this, marriage serves as a symbol of the relationship of Christ and the Church contributing to its sacramental nature.

So what is it in the Genesis story that describes what happens in marriage? Ephesians repeats the verse from Gen 2:24.

For this reason a man shall leave (his) father and (his) mother and be joined to his wife, and *the two shall become one flesh* (my emphasis).

Therefore, in the proper order of marriage, there is no separate wife to obey her husband or husband to obey his wife. By uniting their love before God, they become one, inseparable.

We are often taught that Jesus instituted the seven sacraments. However, marriage is a primordial sacrament, meaning its origin lies in *creation*. The story of the Fall in Genesis tells how marriage is disrupted by sin and woman *becomes* submissive to her husband. She was not submissive before the fall but *sin disrupts* what God has ordained. As *redeemer*, Jesus restores

³ Jesus references marriage back to creation in Mt 19:3-9 and Mk 10:2-12 when he is asked if divorce is permissible.

⁴ Mk 2:18-22, Mt 9:14-17, Lk 5:33-39

marriage to what it was in the *beginning* before the *fall*⁵. As Pope John Paul II says marriage as sacrament heals us of sexual disorder from the fall.

Our reading from Genesis tells us why God created marriage.

The Lord God said: “It is not good for the man to be alone⁶. I will make a suitable partner for him (Gen 2:18).

The word *partner* is extremely important. The Hebrew word, *ezer*, translates as helper, but partner is more correct contextually today because it is not helper in a subservient sense but as a *co-worker*. So, God then made the animals and gave the man dominion over them. But none of the animals could be that special partner that the man needed because they were not like him and were not *his equal*. So, God cast a deep sleep⁷ on the man and took of the man’s ribs and formed the woman from it. It is important to understand the significance of the rib. Woman was not made from man’s head so that she might rule over him, nor was she made from man’s feet to be walked on by him. She was made from *his side* to be his *equal* and walk hand in hand with him. The man awakens from his sleep and as the bride’s parents bring her to the groom in our wedding ceremony today so does God present the woman to the man. For even today, God brings the bride and groom together in sacramental union⁸. The man knows immediately that this woman is the one he was meant for, “This one, at last, is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh” (Genesis 2:23a). Man was never meant to be alone. Man and Woman are made to compliment one another so they are complete only when together. We cannot discover who we truly are until we find our soul mate, our equal.

⁵ In his Theology of the Body, Pope John Paul II develops this triad of creation, fall, and redemption into a sound theology containing original solitude, original unity, and original nakedness. Further discussion here would go beyond the scope intended here but it is a sound theology for all.

⁶ Pope John Paul II calls this “original solitude.”

⁷ In Old Testament language this casting of deep sleep presents the making of a covenant. For another example see Genesis 15. Likewise v23 is seen as a covenantal oath made to God and v24 is seen as covenantal language.

⁸ Pope John Paul II calls this “original unity.”

As God has made man and woman to *compliment* one another, St. John Chrysostom assigns separate roles to men and women based on the *culture of his time*. Men are to love, and to rule in public life while women are to be obedient and yet rule the household. He says one person must be in control to make the household work.⁹

When husband and wife are at odds with one another, their household is in no better shape than a storm tossed ship in which the captain and pilot disagree.¹⁰

But today, we realize men and women are equals. However, within each individual marriage spouses should evaluate each other's gifts and divide the household labor according to gifts, not gender. While psychologists have realized the problems of stereotyping common to Chrysostom's time, his concept of roles is still useful today as a recognition of gifts. Man and woman compliment one another because their gifts compliment each other not just as man and woman but as unique individuals created in the image of God. In recognizing each other's gifts and acknowledging the faults of each other, you are able to grow in love as a couple, growing towards the sacrificial love of Christ.

What I have said so far focuses on the spiritual and emotional union of the couple. Yet, our readings from Scripture, you also become one "physical" body. As woman and man are one flesh in marriage (Gen 2:23), Ephesians (5:28-29) teaches your body no longer belongs to you but rather it now belongs to your spouse. In the first letter to the Corinthians, we read

A wife does not have authority over her own body, but rather her husband, and similarly a husband does not have authority over his own body, but rather his wife (1 Cor 7:4).

Marriage is a total giving of one's self. One no longer belongs to one's self but belongs to their spouse. And later in the same letter

⁹ St. John Chrysostom, *On Marriage and Family*, Trans. By Catherine P. Roth & David Anderson. Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2000, 53.

¹⁰Ibid., 28.

For just as woman came from man, so man is born of woman; but all things are from God (1 Cor 11:12).

Man cannot claim authority, as suggested by Ephesians 5:23, over woman because she was made from his side because as the first woman came from man, since then all men have been born of women. Men would not exist without the women. Thus, men owe themselves to women for their birth and women owe themselves to men by order of creation.

A final closing thought. In the gospel today, Jesus tells us we are no longer slaves to him because he has told us everything he knows so we are called to be his friends. So as Christ shares with his bride, the Church, everything he knows so must you share yourselves totally with each other. As a couple united in Christ, you cannot make (major) decisions without discussing it with your spouse. To do so is to treat the spouse as a slave, a lower being. None of what I have said today is useful if there is no communication between you. For all of this to happen in marriage, there must be communication.

So to our couple today I encourage you to treat each other as equals, to see God's presence in your marriage by the sacrament you confer on one another in your marriage and "what God has joined together, no human being must separate" (Mt 19:6 and Mk 10:9).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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