

The Feast of the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph

(Years A, B and C)

Second Reading

Colossians 3:12-21

The second reading is from Colossians, it is from one of the letters of St. Paul. And because it's a feast day and not ordinary time, it is thematically linked to the other readings for the day. In this case it's focused on St. Paul's teaching for the Christian family from his letter to the Colossians 3:12-21. This a beautiful, beautiful passage. You can find a similar passage in Ephesians 5, that's the more famous version of Paul's teaching for families, but every year at Christmas time the Church puts this particular passage before us to give us an image of not what Old Testament family life looks like, but what Christian family life looks like in the new covenant. So listen to these words of wisdom from St. Paul. He says this:

Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness, and patience, forbearing one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teach and admonish one another in all wisdom, and sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs with thankfulness in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

Alright, pause there for a second. What has Paul just done? He's given us a list of all the major Christian virtues: compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness (that means gentleness), patience, forgiveness, harmony and above all love (agape). Now why does the Church give us that? Do you think perhaps the Church knows that living life in a family is not easy and that is easy to be unkind, impatient, prideful, lacking forgiveness, not having harmony, having discord? Yeah, the Church knows that all of those things afflict family life, especially modern family

life, where there has been such a breakdown of the family. So it is wonderful that the Church is giving us this vision of the kind of virtues we need to cultivate if we are going to have peace and harmony in the family. Above all forgiveness, as well as patience with one another, forbearing one another; because families are going to hurt one another. You hurt the people that you are closest to so easily. We need these admonitions from St. Paul to show us the kind of virtue that we have to intentionally cultivate in our family life if we are going to have happiness in our home. Especially gratitude, there notice, it is so easy to complain all the time about the difficulties of family life. Well what does Paul say? “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly” and do everything with thankfulness. Do everything with thanksgiving in your heart, praising God for the many blessings that come with family life. Now I could stop there and get off easy, but I won't because the next verses are some more challenging verses. And I have done a full presentation on this on a CD called *Wives Do What?! Ephesians 5 & St. Paul's Life-Changing Vision of the Christian Family*. You can check that out if you want an hour long discussion of the implications of this passage, but for now I want to just keep it short and sweet and highlight here that Paul brings his discussion of the Christian family to a close by giving specific exhortations to four groups: wives, husbands, children and fathers. This is what he says in these last verses:

Wives, be subject [or submissive or subordinate as some translations will say] to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives, and do not be harsh with them. Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord.

And then finally, and this was my favorite verse when I was a kid:

Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged.

So I would always look at my parents and think “listen, take it easy on us, It can be tough to be a kid sometimes.” So that's the closing verse here for this exhortation to children. I love this passage from Paul on the Feast of the Holy Family, precisely because it is a specific address to different groups within the family. You don't get that very often, and I still remember, even as a kid at Christmas time, kind of perking up when I heard these verses because it was directly addressed to me as a child. And the same thing with husbands and wives, it is specifically addressed

to them. But it can be a cause of some difficulty or consternation because it's not exactly clear what Paul means, especially his exhortation to wives. When he says wives be submissive, subordinate or subject, what does that mean? Is Paul here, through the Holy Spirit, endorsing a kind of chauvinism, in which he's basically giving the husband's license to tyrannize his wife or to abuse his wife or to dominate his wife? Is that with this is, Paul the chauvinist? What does he mean by wives be subordinate? And also too, why does he exhort husbands to love their wives? I mean do we need a command to love one's wife? What's going on here?

So real quickly here, first and foremost, let me look at the wives subordinate passage first. Here what I'd like to do is not just draw on the wisdom of the tradition, but on the teaching of the popes themselves. What does the Church say about this passage? How have the Popes interpreted it? And for this case I draw on two popes in particular. First, St. John Paul II in his famous *Theology of the Body*, he actually addressed the meaning of submission in Paul's letters. And he pointed out that although in *Colossians* we don't see this specifically brought up, in the parallel passage in Paul's letter to the *Ephesians*, Paul makes clear that the kind of submission he's calling for in marriage is not one-sided, it is a mutual submission by which the spouses, the husband and the wife, offer themselves in submission to one another. So John Paul II said this, and I am quoting him here:

This relationship is nevertheless not one-sided submission... Husband and wife are, in fact, "subject to one another," mutually subordinated to one another. The source of this reciprocal submission lies in Christian pietas and its expression is love.¹

So the first point John Paul makes here is that however you are going to interpret Paul's specific directives to wives and husbands after this, we always need to remember that the overarching context of his instruction is mutual subordination and mutual love between husband and wife. So it is not as if because Paul exhorts husbands to love their wives, wives don't have to love their husbands; or because Paul exhorts wives to be subordinate to their husbands, there is no subordination of the husband to the wife of any kind. No, there is a mutual subordination and there's a mutual love because of the reciprocity of the husband laying down his life for his

¹ John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them*, 473

bride and the wife giving herself as a gift back to the husband. That's what marriage is all about, this covenant relationship of love. But within that context of love, Paul does give specific directives that are particular to the wife and to the husband, and they are unique to each of those roles. And Pope Pius XI in his beautiful encyclical on Christian marriage, called *Casti Connubii*, that came out in 1930, he actually explains what this means and what it doesn't mean. So what does Paul mean when he tells wives to be subject to their husbands in a specific way. Listen to the words of Pope Pius XI, he says this:

This subjection, however, does not deny or take away the liberty which fully belongs to the woman both in view of her dignity as a human person, and in view of her most noble office as wife and mother and companion; nor does it bid her obey her husband's every request if not in harmony with right reason or with the dignity due to wife; nor, in fine, does it imply that the wife should be put on a level with those persons who in law are called minors, to whom it is not customary to allow free exercise of their rights on account of their lack of mature judgment, or of their ignorance of human affairs...

Alright, pause there. Notice what the Pope is saying here. Contrary to what many people assume when they hear Paul's words, "wives be submissive," the text does not mean that she has to obey her husband's every request if it's not in harmony with reason or in harmony with the dignity due to her as a human person. Nor does it mean that she is on the same level as the children. That is really important. The spouses have a different relationship than the children. So what does it mean? Well Pius XI concludes by saying this:

But it [St. Paul's teaching] forbids that exaggerated liberty which cares not for the good of the family; it forbids that in this body which is the family, the heart be 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...²

In other words, what Paul there is doing is calling husbands and wives, and wives in particular and husbands in particular, to live out their vocation not just in mutual

Pope Pius XI, Encyclical Letter on Christian Marriage, *Casti Connubii* nos. 26-28

subordination, but in such a way that the family forms a living organism, with the husband as spiritual leader or as head of the family, and with the woman as, in a sense, the emotional leader or the relational leader as the heart of the family. I always like to tell students, which one is more important, your head or your heart? Which one can you live without, the head or the heart? If you cut off the head, the body dies. If you cut out the heart, the body dies. Both of them are needed in the family, but they function in different ways. They have different roles in the relationship within the family in order to give order, harmony and peace to the family. And that's really what Paul's talking about, he is exhorting husbands to choose their wives, to love their wives, to lay down their lives for their wives; and he's exhorting wives to respect their husbands, and in particular to respect their role as the spiritual leader of the family. Which by the way, to all you men out there, if that's not a role that you're taking yet, this Sunday reading should challenge you. If you want to be the natural leader of your family, you need to lead in the supernatural as well. If you want to be the financial leader of your family, then you need to be the prayerful leader of your family as well. Scripture calls a man to be the spiritual head of his household, and so to take the reins and to initiate that spiritual leadership is essential for having harmony and peace within the family. He is also calling children, last but certainly not least, to obey their parents and for parents not to be overbearing on the children, to be gentle, to be patient, to be firm to be sure, but not to beat children down to where they lose hope or they lose heart as they go through that process of growing, like olive shoots, which grow slowly, to one day bear fruit as Christians and in Christian families in their own right.