

## The Twenty-first Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year B)

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| <i>First Reading</i>      | Joshua 24:1-2a, 15-17, 18b  |
| <i>Response</i>           | O taste and see that the Lord is good!  |
| <i>Psalm</i>              | Psalm 34:2-3, 16-17, 18-19, 20-21   |
| <i>Second Reading</i>     | Ephesians 5:21-32   |
| <i>Gospel Acclamation</i> | ...the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life.<br>You have the words of eternal life |
| <i>Gospel</i>             | John 6:60-69  |

The twenty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time for year B brings us to what is arguably one of the most controversial passages in Ephesians, especially in terms of the selections in Ephesians for the lectionary. And that's Paul's famous teaching in Ephesians 5:21-32 on the submission of Christian wives to their husbands and on the love that Christian husbands are enjoined to show toward their wives.

So this is one of those passages that makes modern day preachers nervous. It can be a very difficult passage to work through, because it's easily misunderstood. And a lot of people, frankly, aren't familiar with how the text has been interpreted in the living tradition of the Church, either through the teaching of the Church Fathers or most especially through the teachings of the modern popes. So let's look at what St. Paul has to say, what he meant in its original context, and then how the Church has received it in her official teaching.

So, in Ephesians 5:21, Paul says these words:

Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ. Wives, be subject to your husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. As the church is subject to Christ, so let wives also be subject in everything to their husbands. Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that he might present the church to himself

in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. Even so husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no man ever hates his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body. “For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.”

That’s a quote from the book of Genesis. Paul continues:

This mystery is a profound one, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church; however, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband.<sup>1</sup>

A lot going on here in this passage. Let me try to boil it down, because it is going to be boiling it down. I have a much longer lecture on this passage, a talk I gave years ago called “Wives, Do What?”... Paul’s message for Christian husbands and wives or Christian marriages. And there I go into a full scale verse by verse examination. So if you want more, check that out.

But here I just want to give you a kind of brief summary of that presentation and a few key points of ... important points from the teaching of the Church Fathers and the Magisterium. Alright, so, first point. Everything that Paul is going to say in these verses, everything that he says occurs within a context. And the initial context is that very first verse:

Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ.

So Paul is beginning to give instruction to the Christians in Ephesus, who as we’ll recall, have converted from pagan ways of life, pagan immorality, pagan understandings of what a man is, pagan understandings of what a woman is, pagan understandings of what marriage looks like within a Greco-Roman pagan context,

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

and he's trying to give them (and substitute for them) a Christian understanding of what marriage is.

And so the very first principle that he lays out here is a principle of what John Paul II would later refer to as mutual submission. So the foundation of the relationship between a husband and a wife is a mutual subjection to one another:

Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ. (Ephesians 5:21)

And so the reason I emphasize that is because many people — especially modern readers — when they see this “wives be subject” or “wives be submissive” verse, they immediately assume that Paul is talking about a kind of one-sided subjection where the husband is superior and the wife is inferior in dignity. And that's just not true when you look at the verses in context, because Paul, as a Jew, is presupposing the equal dignity of man and woman.

If you go back to the book of Genesis 1, both male and female (in Genesis 1:26-27) are created in the image and likeness of God. So there's equal dignity of man and woman. They're both human beings with a rational nature, immortal souls created in the image and the likeness of God.

So when Paul talks about mutual submission, there's a foundation to his words in that Jewish understanding of all human beings being created with equal dignity in the eyes of God. It's a biblical principle. So we shouldn't interpret him as speaking about inferiority or superiority, because clearly, the mutual subjection implies equal dignity. That's the first point.

Second thing we want to highlight... after establishing that initial ground of mutual submission, now Paul is going to go into the specifics of the relationship between a husband and a wife. He begins with the wives, and he only gives them a few verses. But these are the controversial verses. So 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? Again, many people assume that what Paul means here is that the wife is inferior, but that is simply an erroneous reading. It's

impossible to sustain such an interpretation when you look at Paul’s grammar, his language, and the context.

For example, when Paul says “be subject” or “be submissive”, the Greek word is *hypotassomai*. *Hypotassomai* — it literally means to be ordered under. *Hypo* means “under”; *tassomai* means “to order”, like a taxonomy in English means a certain ordering of things. Okay, so *hypotassomai*, the best English translation is actually “be subordinate” ... sub meaning “under,” order — you hear it in that word “subordinate”. Okay, so it is not a question of superiority or inferiority, but a question of an ordering of a relationship.

And you can see this very clearly by looking at two parallels. First example, if you go to Luke 2:51, Luke uses the very same verb, *hypotassomai*, to describe Jesus’ relationship to Mary and Joseph. It says:

And he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was  
[*hypotassomai*] to them ...

He was subordinate to them.

... and his mother kept all these things in her heart.

Now what does that mean? That means that Jesus obeyed His mother and father. He treated 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. So it’s about the ordering of their relationship within the family.

But there's even a better one than that. In 1 Corinthians 15:28, Paul himself uses the word *hypotassomai* to say that Christ will be subordinate to the Father. This is really important. 1 Corinthians 15:28, Paul says:

When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected...

...or submissive or subjective or subordinate. You can translate it any way, *hypotassomai*:

...to him who put all things under him, that God may be everything to every one.

When Paul says that Christ is subject to the Father, does he mean that Christ is inferior? Please say no. That would be a heresy for him to say that. Although, I will point out that the Arian heretics loved this verse, because they used it to argue that Christ was inferior, that He was a creature and not God — not the Creator, not the uncreated God.

So the point is, that the Greek word that Paul is using when he says to wives to be subject to their husband, in no way implies the inferiority of women to men. What it implies is that within the relationships of the family, the husband is the leader. That's what he's saying. And he's exhorting Christian wives to be submissive to the husband as the spiritual leader of the family. We'll flesh it out in just a minute, but that's the meaning of the word *hypotassomai*. There's an order within the family in which the husband is the head, or as we would say today, the leader.

Okay, now he gives an analogy for the headship of the husband. He says:

For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. As the church is subject to Christ, so let wives also be subject in everything to their husbands. (Ephesians 5:23-24)

So you notice here, this is important. Paul is describing ... although he's describing the mutual and equal dignity of husband and wife, he's also establishing the

Christian husband as the head and the leader, as the true leader of the Christian family. And so his exhortation to the wife is to respect the husband's leadership by submitting to him as the leader of not just of the family — but he's actually describing the leader within the relationship of just the marriage itself.

Now it's very interesting to me, if you'll notice ... Paul gives just two verses to the instruction to Christian wives. Now he's going to give about ten verses to the husband. He's going to give a much more elaborate explanation for what husbands are called to do. So let's see what he says to the husbands:

Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her...

So whereas Paul exhorts women to *hypotassomai* — to be subject to the husband as leader — he exhorts the husband to have agape for his wife, or *agapaō* in Greek. This agape is the same verb that's used to describe the sacrificial love of Christ. For example in the Gospel of John:

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son... (John 3:16a)

That love is *agapaō* or agape as a noun. So he's calling husbands here to exhibit that love for their wives, and he draws again an analogy between Christ and the Church. So the wife imitates the Church, which subjects itself to Christ as head, and the husband imitates Christ, who loves the Church with a sacrificial life-giving love, who gives himself up for her. With this end in mind — this is so important — the reason the husband is supposed to love his wife like Christ loved the Church is so:

...that he might sanctify her ...

It's for her holiness, as he goes on to say:

...having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.

So the analogy here is that the husband loves his wife with a sacrificial love for the sanctification of his wife, for her salvation, for her holiness. It's a spiritual — this is important, it's so important. It's a spiritual love that Paul is calling the husband to, because it's a spiritual leadership that the husband is called to by Christ as head of the family. So the headship that he's talking about here is above all, primarily, spiritual. Now it covers everything that the family life and marriage life involve, but it is primarily spiritual, because it's ordered towards salvation. It's ordered toward sanctification.

So you'll sometimes hear people say, maybe like in a nuptial Mass or nuptial homily, the priest will tell the husband, "Your primary task is to get your wife to Heaven." That's another way of expressing what Paul is saying here, that just as Christ loved the Church for the sake of Her salvation (for Her sanctification), so a husband's love for his wife should be ordered toward holiness and toward her salvation. So that just as Christ presented to the Lord the Church without any blemish or spot or wrinkle — He wants to present to the Father the holy Church, cleansed of all sin — so too a husband's principle goal should be to present to God the Father his wife as a holy and unblemished and beautiful bride. That's the goal of the husband's love, is her sanctification.

It's one of the reasons that the Sacrament of Holy Matrimony (to get ahead of myself) is one of the Sacraments of Service. Holy Orders and Holy Matrimony are the two Sacraments of Service in the *Catechism*, because they're ordered toward the salvation of someone else. They're not primarily ordered toward *your* sanctification; they're ordered toward the sanctification of others. With the priest, it's ordered toward the sanctification of the people of God, and with Matrimony, it's ordered toward the sanctification of your spouse. It's not about you. It's about them. It's about their sanctification.

Alright, so Paul is exhorting husbands here to love their wives, and he says:

... as their own bodies.

And the image he gives here for the kind of love is sacrificial love, but it's also life-giving love. It should nurture — you should nurture your wife. And it's tender.

You should cherish her. So he uses the language of love, nourish, cherish it. He says:

For no man ever hates his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, as Christ does the church...

So this is a very powerful image. Many, many people, when they read Paul's words, they think, "Ah!" He's a misogynist; he thinks women are inferior to men. Second, they also often assume the wives have it tough and the husbands get off easy. Because he tells the wives to be submissive, but all he says to the husbands is love one another.

Now that's understandable in a modern context when we think of love as primarily an emotion. But if you define love as choosing to sacrifice for the good of the other, and then you make the standard of that love the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, the husbands, it becomes very clear, that Paul is not letting the husbands off easy. He's calling them to divine love, to imitate Christ. And until you meet that standard, you still haven't met the standard of Christian love like Paul gives us in Ephesians 5. This is very powerful, very demanding.

And finally, Paul roots all of this in the Sacrament of Matrimony itself — both in the order of creation and in the order of redemption. So in verse 31, he says:

“For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” (Ephesians 5:31)

That's a quote from the end of the book of Genesis, showing that marriage is not a human, man-made institution; it's God-made. It's something rooted in creation itself — a marriage of one man, one woman.

But Paul then applies it to Christ and the Church, and he says these awesome words:

This mystery is a profound one, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church... (Ephesians 5:32)



And this passage here, when Paul says “a great mystery”, the Greek is *mysterion mega*. It’s a mega mystery. In Latin, it’s *sacramentum magnum*, the great Sacrament. And this mega mystery is the mystery of Christ’s love for the Church. Sometimes you’ll hear it called the nuptial mystery of Christ’s love for the Church.

In fact, I don’t have it here with me, but I wrote a whole book on this called *Jesus the Bridegroom: The Greatest Love Story Ever Told*. And in that book, I go into a lot more detail about this chapter. In fact, I begin the book with a quote from Ephesians 5 and the great mystery of how Paul can compare the brutality of a Roman execution to a wedding, to the love of a man for his wife. So check out *Jesus the Bridegroom* if you want to go into a little more depth on that.

And then he wraps up and he just ends the passage by circling back to his initial description of the relationship between man and wife: wives, submit to the husband; husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the Church.

Okay, so that’s a brief overview of what Paul is saying to the Ephesians. And again, the reason he’s having to say this to them is because they’re converts from paganism. There are different pagan views of marriage, and there are different virtues and vices within pagan culture. Marriage takes on many different forms in many different cultures, but there are pagan writers who are very clear about the inferiority of women to men — they don’t have Genesis to tell them otherwise — as well as about the fact that infidelity is not a big problem from a pagan perspective.

One pagan writer that I mention in *Jesus the Bridegroom* says that we have wives to bear us children and mistresses for pleasure. So the idea that a husband would in any way ever be subject to his wife and love her with that kind of sacrificial love that we see Christ loving the Church is just so far beyond pagan conception of marriage. And Paul’s here trying to transform the Christian life of people at Ephesus by transforming the family.

So this is really far from being some kind of testament to misogyny. Ephesians 5 is the first charter for the Christian family. It’s inspired by the Holy Spirit. It’s an

inspired description of what the relationship between a Christian wife and a Christian husband should look like, as opposed to a pagan husband and a pagan wife in a first century context.

So how is this Church text been received in the history of the Church? Let me round this discussion out. Again, read *Jesus the Bridegroom* if you want to go into more depth. There are so many questions I'm sure that are raising here that I can't get to right now. But let me just give you a few insights from authoritative teachers — both Church Fathers and the popes.

So the first thing I want to highlight here is that in the fourth century, one of my favorite Church Fathers, St. John Chrysostom — who I've mentioned frequently because he wrote commentaries on all of Paul's letters — wrote several homilies on Christian marriage and family life that I really encourage you to read. Several of them are in this volume right here, called *On Marriage and Family Life*. And in it, he has a long homily 20, is John's homily on Ephesians 5, the reading for today. So just like John was preaching on these verses over a thousand years ago in Constantinople, we're doing it today. So it's a very important passage in the history of the Church.

In it, listen to what John Chrysostom says to husbands. So if anybody thinks the husbands are getting off easy in Ephesians 5, John Chrysostom quickly corrected that, because he probably imagined there were some husbands in the audience saying, "Honey, listen to this. Be submissive to me." And so this is how John responds:

*Have you noted the measure of obedience? Pay attention to love's high standard. If you take the premise that your wife should submit to you, as the church submits to Christ, then you should also take the same kind of careful, sacrificial thought for her that Christ takes for the church. Even if you must offer your own life for her, you must not refuse. Even if you must undergo countless struggles on her behalf and have all kinds of things to endure and suffer, you must not refuse. Even if you suffer all this, you have still not done as much as Christ has for the church. For you are already married when you*

act this way, whereas Christ is acting for one who has rejected and hated him.<sup>2</sup>

Pay attention to love's high standard. So what Chrysostom's doing here is he's immediately correcting any kind of chauvinistic or misogynistic potential interpretation of Paul's words, by immediately calling the husband to lay down his life for his bride ... to recognize that what Paul's describing, that the kind of leadership Paul is describing here in Ephesians 5 is a Christ-like leadership, and so that if the husband expects his wife to submit, he also has to follow the words of Scripture here and imitate Christ sacrificially ... and that even if he does this, he's still not doing as much as Jesus did. Because he and his wife love each other (presumably), but Christ did this for the Church when the Church hated him. Like Paul says in Romans:

But God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us. (Romans 5:8)

Well, what about, though, the role of wives? How do we interpret those verses? And in this case, I want to recommend to you one of the first magisterial interpretations of Ephesians 5 that I'm aware of, and it's still a very beautiful letter. In Pope Pius XI's wonderful encyclical on Christian Marriage called *Casti Connubi*. Chaste marriage would be the translation of that. This was published in 1930 when marriage was already starting to unravel in a modern context. Listen to what the pope said. He too made clear to correct any chauvinistic or misogynistic interpretations of Paul's words and give a beautiful explanation for the kind of relationship he's describing in the Christian home. Pope Pius XI wrote these words:

The Apostle commends in these words: "Let women be subject to their husbands as to the Lord, because the husband is the head of the wife, and Christ is the head of the Church." *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*

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<sup>2</sup> St. John Chrysostom, *Homily on Ephesians* 20:5:25

*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...*

She's not a child. That's not the kind of submission Paul is talking about here. He continues:

...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.<sup>3</sup>

So just pause there. That's paragraphs 26-28. What he's basically saying here is, the subjection Paul's talking about has nothing to do with the equal dignity of the wife. It doesn't take away from that at all. And it's also not putting her on par with children. So in this case, it's different, even than what Jesus is described as giving to Joseph and Mary. That subjection is the subjection of a child to his parents. Here, the submission that Paul is talking about is that of a companion to a husband. It's a different kind of submission. It has to be in accord with her dignity. Pope Pius XI continues. What does that mean? He says:

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.* Again, this subjection of wife to husband in its degree and manner may vary according to the different conditions of persons, place and time.

It's going to look different in different cultures.

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<sup>3</sup> Pope Pius XI, Encyclical Letter on Christian Marriage, *Casti Connubi* nos. 26-28

In fact, if the husband neglect his duty, it falls to the wife to take his place in directing the family. *But the structure of the family and its fundamental law, established and confirmed by God, must always and everywhere be maintained intact.*<sup>4</sup>

Pius XI on Christian Marriage, paragraphs 26-28. So for me, the big takeaway from this passage is Pius' image of head and heart. How can Paul speak of the mutual submission of husband and wife if the husband is the leader or if the husband is the head? John Paul II emphasizes this in his Theology of the Body, the mutual submission. But how does that work with what Paul's language that he uses here? And Pius gives us a wonderful analogy. He says if the husband is the head of the family (as Paul says), then the wife is the heart. And if he takes the chief place in leading the family, then she takes the chief place in loving.

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.

So I just encourage you to pray with that, think about it. Read John Paul II's Theology of the Body; it has some beautiful meditations on this. But don't allow a shallow facile reading of Ephesians 5 to make us miss the riches that are really present in this text. It's ironic that the passage that people think has so little to say to us today is precisely the passage where the Holy Spirit is giving us this beautiful template for a harmonious home that is modeled on Christ's love for the Church.

And I'll end here with a quote from St. John Chrysostom again in his book *On Marriage and Family Life*. He actually says in his comments on this, he says:

If we regulate our households in this way, we will also be fit to oversee the Church, for indeed, the household is a little Church.

He uses the Greek *mikra ecclesia* — little church.

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<sup>4</sup> Pope Pius XI, Encyclical Letter on Christian Marriage, *Casti Connubi* nos. 26-28

Therefore, it is possible for us to surpass all others in virtue by becoming good husbands and wives.<sup>5</sup>

This passage from John Chrysostom that I just read is the inspiration for Vatican II's taking up the image of the Domestic Church and using that to describe — John Paul II does this all the time — describing the family itself, not just as lay people living in the world, trying to make their way and going to Mass on Sunday. But family life itself is a microcosm of the life of the Church.

And just as in the Church you have one spiritual leader, we have a pope — there's one head. But you also have a body. So too in the family, the husband is the head, but the wife is the heart. And when they harmoniously work together in mutual subjection out of charity and respect, what's created is a *mikra ecclesia*, a little church, a domestic church ... which has all the flowerings and fruits and virtues of the macro Church, because the Holy Spirit is alive and living in it as well.

And John is very clear that that holiness can be attained by wives and husbands. You don't have to go to the monastery. You can live that charity and that life in the domestic church, in the little church of the home ... of married life, and God willing, eventually the life of a family.

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<sup>5</sup> John Chrysostom, *On Marriage and Family Life*, pp. 60-61