

A Profound Mystery

In the name of him who loved the Church and gave himself up for her, dear friends in Christ: Today's reading from St. Paul's letter to the Ephesians is one of the key passages of Scripture that describes God's design for Christian marriage. Specifically it addresses how both husband and wife are, in their own respective ways, to express their love for one another. It seems to me to be a timely topic for us to review. In these modern times there's a lot of misunderstanding and confusion about what marriage is and what it's for. There are those who want to reduce it to little more than a legal contract – one that can be entered into or gotten out of at the drop of a hat. Some on the radical fringe of society would like to see the institution done away with altogether. They consider it a relic of an oppressive past that we've outgrown and no longer need. There are men who treat marriage as a way to acquire a live in maid who provides conjugal benefits, and there are feminists who see it as a battlefield for asserting their absolute equality with males. Clearly, not even a majority of the judges sitting on our nation's Supreme Court understand what marriage is supposed to be. So, like I said, it's a timely topic. And if we want to know what marriage really is all about, we need to listen to the Lord who created it in the first place and gave it to humankind as a precious gift.

But before we proceed, it's necessary to say that not everyone is or will be married. Some are presently too young to enter into that blessed estate. Some will remain single their entire lives – an estate that carries with it its own distinct blessings and challenges. Others are widowed or divorced. No matter. It still has to be acknowledged that the marriage union between a husband and wife is and always will be the first and most foundational human relationship. It's the one by which all other family relationships are defined. And it's the one in which new lives are generated according to the will and good pleasure of God. So regardless of one's marital status, we all need to know what the Lord intends for those who are married because it's incumbent upon us to promote God's will in this world, and to support married couples and encourage them to conform themselves to his good design. The fact is that it's not easy being married. And with so much confusion out there as well as the open attacks on the institution, it isn't getting any easier. So, with that, let's get into it.

And to begin, I'd like to point out that Paul calls marriage a profound *mystery*. That's a word that requires a bit of explanation. We normally think of a mystery as something that's unknown or hard to understand. If I say, "It's a mystery to me", it means I don't get it. But that's not what mystery means in a biblical sense. No, scripturally speaking, a *mystery* is something that's revealed. To be precise, a mystery is a physical action or thing that can be seen by which a greater unseen reality can be grasped and understood. For example, the sacraments are called mysteries. In Holy Baptism what you see is water being poured on someone's head; but what's actually happening is rebirth in the Holy Spirit and the washing away of sin. So also in the Lord's Supper, what you see is people eating a tiny piece of bread and drinking a bit of wine; but what's really going on is that they are receiving to themselves the very body and blood of Jesus for the forgiveness of their sins and the strengthening of their faith.

It's in this sense that Paul calls marriage a mystery. Though not sacramental because by it sins are not being forgiven, still, in marriage – when a couple is living in it according to God's intent – we are given a living portrait of the Lord Jesus and the relationship he has with the Holy Church. So it's something far greater than a mere legal contract or a convenient living arrangement; it's something sacred, something transcendent, something God gives us by which we are able to showcase to the world the love of Jesus and his saving work on behalf of fallen

humankind. And that means as Christians we want to do it right. When we dishonor marriage, live in it improperly, or treat it lightly like something that's disposable what we're actually doing is bearing false witness about Jesus. We're presenting a false proclamation of the Gospel by which we are saved. We don't want to do that. We want people to see Christ in us.

How? Well, Paul tells us: "Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her." That is to say a man's love for his wife is to be displayed in giving himself sacrificially for her. As Jesus gave himself even to humiliation, intense suffering, and death on the cross to provide for the life of the Church, so a husband is to do everything in his power to attend and provide for his wife, to see that her needs are satisfied, to clothe her, feed her, shelter her, defend her from danger – even to the point of facing death to protect her. He is in every sense to place her needs above his own. And it's more than looking out for her physical wellbeing. Paul speaks of how Christ, having sanctified and cleansed his Church, presents her to himself in splendor, without any spot or wrinkle ... that she may be holy and without blemish. Christ honors the Church. And so a husband is called to honor his wife. He is to extol her virtues, defend her reputation, and freely forgive her every sin and fault. Obviously this means that he will never speak ill of her or tell others of her shortcomings. He is to love her as he loves his own body – because that's what she is. In marriage God has made her one with him. As the Church is the body of Christ and the two are one, so a husband and wife are one flesh – the two together in a union that is greater than the sum of its parts. That is how a husband is to love his wife: through sacrificially serving her as Christ serves the Church.

She, on the other hand, is called to express her love for her husband in the sacrifice of her will. "Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the Church." You know, it's funny: she's actually called to surrender less than he is, but for some reason this is the part people balk at. Our culture rebels against it and too many of my fellow pastors try to explain it away claiming that when Paul tells wives to submit to their husbands he doesn't really mean it or that he was just wrong. Well forget that. The Holy Spirit inspired Paul to write these words and they mean exactly what they say. We would do well to listen to them.

But because there is a lot of controversy about them, some clarification is in order. First, telling wives to submit does not imply any sense of inferiority. The eternal Son gladly submits to the will of his Father, but he is no less God. Similarly, in the US military you have a chain of command. All are equally American citizens, but sergeants outrank privates and tell them what to do. God is a God of order, and he has assigned the role of leadership in marriage to husbands. It's not because men are better or smarter or more capable than women. It's because anytime there's an organization consisting of more than one person, somebody has to be in charge. And the Lord was good enough not to leave us guessing about who that is.

Second, that the wife is called to submit her will necessarily means that she has a will and may express it. If she objects to her husband's direction, if she has what she believes to be a better plan for accomplishing a task or reaching a goal, she's free to say so. Certainly a wise and loving husband will take his wife's thoughts and desires into consideration. It's just that the ultimate decision falls to him.

Why? This is the third item of clarification: it's because the husband is the one whom God holds accountable. A husband is not an autonomous dictator over his wife and family who may rule them according to his own willy-nilly wants and capricious desires. Not at all. God has appointed him his role of leadership because he is holding that man responsible for everything that goes on in his household. He is to lead them in the Lord's ways. And he will have to give

answer for every failure. This is a heavy yoke to bear. It's another way in which a husband is called to sacrificially serve his wife and family. The wife does not bear the same burden. Her submission to her husband is her way to acknowledge his God given authority and lighten the load on his shoulders. It's how she expresses her love for him, just as the Church expresses her love for Jesus by recognizing his authority, following his lead, and receiving his gifts of sacrificial service.

This is the profound mystery that Paul speaks of: that in our marriages we show forth the love of Christ for his bride, the Church, and her love displayed in submission to her Savior – except that we don't. Surely as I've explained all this, you've recognized that as good as it may sound, you've never seen any marriage like it. We husbands are called to be like Christ, giving ourselves in service for our wives. But we aren't that way. We're selfish, always pursuing our own interests at the expense of our wives. And we are more than willing to shirk our duties as leaders in the home. Wives are called to submit to their husbands as the Church does to Christ – and here we're talking about the ideal Church, the Holy Christian Church that does indeed submit to Jesus her Lord in all things. But real wives are not like the ideal. They're more like individual congregations that follow the Lord when it suits them, and go their own way when it doesn't – which may be most of the time. And too real wives are given an extra burden that the Church does not have. You see, the Church never has to forgive Jesus for the way he does things. He always does what's right. But wives do have to forgive their husbands for all the things they do wrong, which according to some wives is everything they do.

My point here is that today's text forces us to see that we have many sins to repent of – sins related to the profound mystery that is marriage, how we've treated it, how we've talked about it with others, how we have lived in it ourselves. And hopefully also through these many sins, you've seen that you're guilty of yet another, and that is of bearing false witness about Jesus and his relationship with his bride, the Holy Church. I began this message by talking about all the confusion and misunderstanding there is about marriage in our society today. Could it be that a big reason for it is that we who bear Christ's name and are members of his body have done such a poor job of presenting the mystery God desires to be revealed in us? I have to believe that's the case. Therefore let each one of us examine our hearts, our thoughts, and our actions and repent. Let us recall again that we are the Church that Christ loved and gave himself for, and that he is even now serving us sacrificially as a loving husband, washing us in water and the Word so that he might present us to himself in splendor without spot or blemish. And by faithful submission to him who saved us by his death on the cross, let us all strive to present in our lives and conversation the profound mystery revealed in God's design for holy marriage. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!