

“WIVES, BE SUBORDINATE TO YOUR HUSBANDS” (Ephesians 5:21-32)

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In today’s gospel, Jesus said, “This saying is hard; who can accept it?”¹ He was talking about the Eucharist, but He could have also been talking about today’s epistle reading. “Wives should be subordinate to their husbands as to the Lord.”² How many of you women bristle every time you hear that line? Now let me ask you, how many of you also consider yourselves traditional Catholics? I suspect that a fair number of you, who answered “yes” to the second question, also answered “yes” to the first. So now, I ask if you see the inconsistency that I see?

This passage is usually explained away by saying that St. Paul was conditioned by his time, writing in the context of an entirely different culture, whose norms don’t apply to today’s world. It’s true that St. Paul lived in a time when women weren’t afforded the same rights as men. Especially in the ancient world of the pagan Gentiles they were almost non-persons, considered property without any rights and under the absolute authority of a father or husband. Yet, strangely enough, St. Paul admonishes them to be subordinate to their husbands, who were essentially their masters anyway. So perhaps, the women of Ephesus weren’t as subservient as we would like to think, because St. Paul wasn’t satisfied with making this admonition once, but instead reiterated it three times in a row.³

Because of our fallen nature, there has always been a certain degree of rebellion against God’s law due to pride, but it wasn’t until recent times that we have witnessed widespread dissent against principles that have been generally held since the beginning of time. Although foment had been brewing throughout the twentieth century, the anti-establishment, anti-authority movement of the 1960s ushered in an era of unprecedented radical social and cultural change. The development of oral contraceptives at this same time intensified it even further by supposedly freeing women from the constraints of childbearing, under the guise of freedom and equality with men. This in turn gave birth to the feminist movement, heavily laden with the principles of Marxism, which, among other things, promised women the same pseudo-freedom enjoyed by the citizens of communist countries. Instead of bringing true freedom, it only led to the slavery of self will and a vast impoverishment of cultural and moral values, which has kept our civilization in a spiral of self-destruction ever since.

Shared authority and co-leadership may sound good but it just doesn’t work. All one has to do is look at the way things function in this world. Any human endeavor devoid of a clear authority and leader in one person eventually begins to flounder and is ultimately doomed to failure. Instead of humbly submitting to the decision of one for the good of all, everyone ends up only looking for the fulfillment of their own individual desires. Anybody that knows anything about how things work will tell you that running something by committee just does not work. Either someone has to ultimately make the decisions or it will eventually fall apart. An army can’t function efficiently without a general. A corporation cannot function efficiently without a CEO. Without a pope, the Church would soon break up into a thousand opposing sects, just as the Protestants have already done. The family also needs a head and leader because on a human level it makes sense. Anyone with even a

cursory knowledge of how human organizations work will tell you that this is the way it should be.

So why, feminists (and perhaps even some of you) ask, does it have to be the man? There are many logical reasons but the short answer is that it is God's will. The husband and father is an image of God the Father, to whom the Son, who is also God, willingly and humbly submits. If not for this, we would not even know of the concepts of authority, fatherhood and masculinity, for all of these principles exist in the world only because they first existed in God, who is over all, who is Father and who is "He," not "she". It is God's will that the man be head of the household because He made the relationship within marriage to reflect the relationship of Christ to His Church. "For the husband is head of his wife just as Christ is head of the church, he himself the savior of the body. As the church is subordinate to Christ, so wives should be subordinate to their husbands in everything."⁴

Fearing that they will become minions of a domestic tyrant, (often fueled by a good deal of pride, also), some women, however, have not only shunned St. Paul's admonition but sometimes have taken over the household themselves. And unfortunately, there have also been husbands, who have willingly abdicated their God-given vocation because it's easier if one doesn't have the burden of making the decisions. Yes—easier! Not only have most people misinterpreted this passage from St. Paul, but they've also never read after the first line, conveniently ignoring the next part that says, "Husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one hates his own flesh but rather nourishes and cherishes it, even as Christ does the church."⁵ "For this reason a man shall leave (his) father and (his) mother and be joined to his wife."⁶ Women certainly leave their parents, too, but in mentioning the husband St. Paul specifically points out how the husband must sacrifice himself for his wife. He says, "Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ loved the church and handed himself over for her."⁷ Certainly Christ had all of the prerogatives of being the Son of God but how did He exercise his role as the Head of the Body, the Church? By sacrificing Himself up even to death. Women give birth. Men, to be true men, must give up themselves totally for the sake of their wives and families in a sacrificial love that imitates Christ.

Women usually think only of the sacrifices they must make in being subordinate to their husbands but often don't notice the sacrifices that the husband must make for his family. There are many times when he cannot have his own way because he has to sacrifice his own desires in the name of doing what's best for the family. The Marriage Exhortation that was part of the traditional wedding rite says that Christ "gave to Christians a new vision of what married life ought to be, a life of self-sarificing love like his own." It says that the newlyweds must base their marriage "upon the great principle of self-sacrifice. And so," it continues, "you begin your married life by the voluntary and complete surrender of your individual lives in the interest of that deeper and wider life which you are to have in common." It doesn't talk only about the woman sacrificing herself. It says that both husband and wife must live a life of willing self-sacrifice. They both sacrifice their personal lives, but each in a different way.

Just recently, I read an interesting article on this topic entitled, "Why it makes sense to me to be obedient to my husband." The woman, who wrote it had been an atheistic feminist her entire life, but by an unusual movement of grace she recently became a Catholic. She mentions many of the reasons why she came to agree with the Christian belief that the husband should be the head of the family, but one reason she mentions that one usually never

hears about is the supernatural element. She writes: “There has also been a part of my conversion on this issue that cannot be explained in terms of logic and reason. It's nothing I could prove to a skeptic, but I have seen God work in my life in a big way on the occasions when I've sacrifice my own preferences in order to let my husband have the tie-breaking vote. Even when I am just *sure* that I am right, when I am *positive* that the fabric of the universe will tear apart if things don't go my way, when I step aside and turn the decision over to my husband, things have this uncanny way of working out for the best.”⁸ Perhaps, it's because they're working with God and not in opposition to Him.

How often we forget about, or even sometimes consciously reject “God's way,” choosing instead to have it “my way.” We have to always remember that Sacred Scripture is the inspired Word of God and if we reject what St. Paul writes about marriage, then we must honestly admit that we are choosing to reject what He has told us in order to have our own way. But there's something else. If we reject this passage by giving the excuse that it is only culturally conditioned or that St. Paul hated women (which he didn't), then, just as Luther did, we will have to decide which other passages of Scripture we are going to also reject? Why stop there?

In today's world this is a very difficult scriptural passage. Because of this, many priests either totally ignore it or try to “soften” it so that in the end it doesn't really mean what it's supposed to mean so that people won't get upset at them. However, we all too often look at things in merely human terms and forget their supernatural side. Because Ephesians 5 deals with complex human relationships, it is a very complex and nuanced passage. It is also a very mystical passage, intimately wrapped up in the mystery of Christ's own relationship with His Bride, the Church. We forget this at our own peril, running the risk living a life contrary to the will of God Himself.

As the traditional Marriage Exhortation states, “Sacrifice is usually difficult. Only love can make it easy and perfect love can make it a joy. We are willing to give in proportion as we love. And when love is perfect, the sacrifice is complete.”

¹ John 6:60.

² Ephesians 5:21.

³ Ephesians 5:22-24.

⁴ Ephesians 5:23-24.

⁵ Ephesians 5:28-29.

⁶ Ephesians 5:31.

⁷ Ephesians 5:25.

⁸ Fulwiler, Jennifer, “Why it makes sense to me to be obedient to my husband,” *Conversion Diary*, (<http://www.conversiondiary.com/2009/08/why-it-makes-sense-to-me-to-be-obedient.html>).