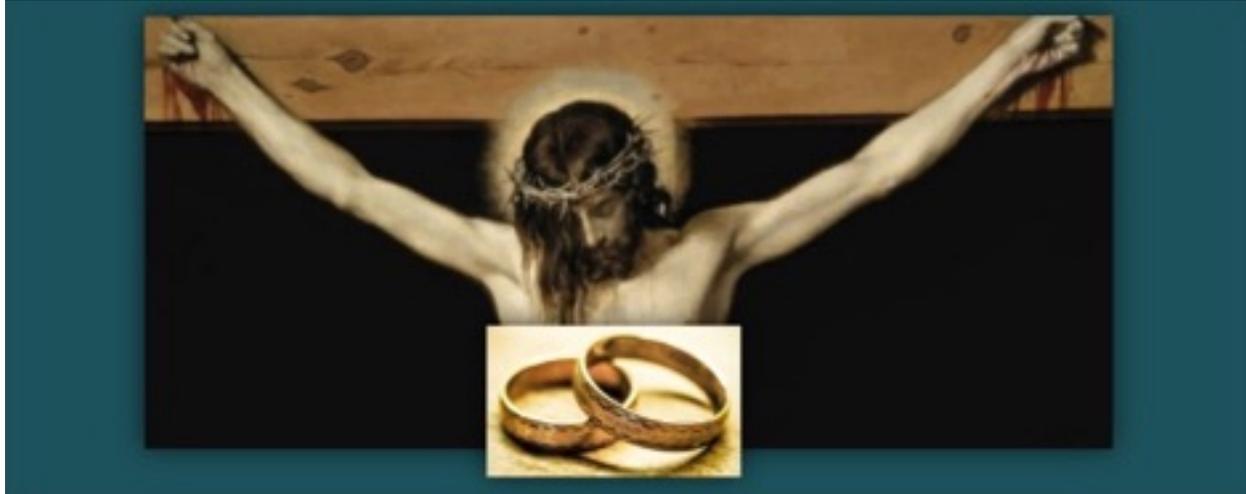


Wives, Be Subordinate to Your Husbands?

John Paul II on Ephesians 5:21-33

FEBRUARY 12, 2016 BY [KATIE FROULA](#)



Ephesians 5:21-33 isn't a popular reading at weddings these days, and at first glance, it seems that it isn't hard to see why. Aren't St. Paul's repeated exhortations for wives to be submissive to their husbands rather sexist and outdated? Hasn't the Church moved beyond all this talk of the husband's role as the head of his wife to a more balanced and equitable conception of marriage? Surely 1 John, or 1 Corinthians, for example, reflect married love more fittingly than this passage does. Ephesians 5 is difficult to reconcile with our modern sensibilities.

On the contrary, Ephesians 5 offers one of the most direct and profound expositions of the beauty of marriage in all of the New Testament. It is merely that the complexity of the passage, and the distance of St. Paul's imagery from modern modes of thought, make the treasures of the passage more difficult to unearth. Fortunately, in his *Theology of the Body*, Pope Saint John Paul II offers reflections on the passage that help us to mine its truths. In this article, we will read Ephesians 5:21-33 with John Paul II as a guide. The mutual reverence of the spouses for each other, and the basis for this reverence will become clear, as will the distinct ways in which husband and wife are called to express the mutual reverence of Christian spouses for one another.

The Mutual Reverence of Spouses

The first point of clarification is that the submission called for in the epistle, though seemingly directed only to the woman, is, in fact, the mutual vocation of both spouses. John Paul II discovers in the letter to the Ephesians what may be called a "fear of Christ," a "*pietas*," or a "reverence for holiness, for the *sacrum*" with which the spouses revere Jesus.¹ Their shared reverence for Christ must overflow into mutual reverence (of a different kind) for one another:

The reciprocal relations of husband and wife must spring from their common relation to Christ ... *pietas, which springs from the profound consciousness of the mystery of Christ, must constitute the basis of the reciprocal relations between the spouses.*"²

The spouses revere Christ together, and revere each other reciprocally, as a natural consequence of their common reverence for their Lord. This reciprocal reverence, grounded in their common reverence for Christ, ought to be at the heart of every Christian marriage.

There are several reasons that common reverence for Christ should naturally overflow into reciprocal reverence of spouses. First, the human person is created in the image of God, with the ability to know and love her Creator. A human person is not a mere good to be used and enjoyed, but one capable of enjoying the good, and one to whom, and for whom, other goods are willed. Such a one belongs, first of all, to herself and to God, and belongs to her spouse only after choosing to make a free gift of herself to him. Thus, the first thing the spouses revere in each other is the dignity of the human person, created by God, and the greatness of his or her free gift of self.

Second, a common love of the good will lead all the just to revere each other's virtue; for Christians, that principle is extended and deepened, as the spouses revere each other on account of their shared love for the same Lord. Third, each spouse, conscious of his own redemption in Christ, is, likewise, conscious of the redemption of the other. As John Paul notes, Ephesians also speaks of "the election of each of them from all eternity in Christ 'to be adoptive sons' of God."³ Thus, the spouses revere each other on account of the great dignity that each possesses as one redeemed by Christ, adopted as a child of God, and called to participate in the very inner life of the Trinity.

The final reason is that marriage mystically images the union of Christ with his Church. Therefore, Christian spouses revere each other as fellow participants in this great mystery. Their love for each other, and for their Lord, leads to a reciprocal submission of the spouses to each other. As we shall see, this submission, though mutual, is not identical for each—it is shaped by each spouse's participation in the image. Thus, the letter to the Ephesians exhorts wives to be submissive to their husbands, as the Church is to Christ, and husbands to love their wives, as Christ loved the Church.⁴ Either love or submission comes to the fore, corresponding to whether the individual spouse primarily images Christ or the Church in the analogy.

However, in his analysis of this text, John Paul makes clear that both love and submission are in fact mutual. The submission of the wife is an expression of her love for her husband and for Christ, in whom the wife "can and should find the motivation for her relationship with her husband."⁵ Moreover, the character of her submission is revealed by the epistle's description of the husband's love. His love of his wife makes any kind of servitude, or one-sided submission impossible, for: "Love makes the *husband simultaneously subject* to his wife, and *subject* in this *to the Lord himself*, as the wife is to the husband."⁶ Thus, both love, both express this love through submission to their spouse, and both do so as a consequence of their shared reverence for Christ.

They submit to one another as to the Lord himself—for Christians are called to express their love for Jesus by serving his people, and this is all the more true for those that we are called to love most intimately as part of the fulfillment of our state in life.

Therefore, John Paul II concludes: “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*.”⁷ This statement is a terse summary of what we have tried to illustrate in this section. The submission of the spouses is mutual, and it springs from their *pietas*—from their sense of the sacred, and their reverence for it. Their shared reverence for Christ leads them to revere the mystery of their marriage, and the gift and dignity of one another in relation to him, and each serves the other as another Christ. This reciprocal submission finds its daily expression in the love of the spouses for one another.

Distinct Roles in the Image

Both spouses love, therefore, and both spouses submit. Nevertheless, it is not without reason that Ephesians highlights the submission of one, and the love of the other. Commenting on Genesis, John Paul notes that it is the woman who is, first of all, the gift—she is created second, and presented to the man as a gift from the Creator, that she may be a suitable partner for him.⁸ Consistent with this, in his reading of Ephesians, John Paul notes that it is, first of all, the man who loves, and the woman who is loved.⁹ This corresponds to the man’s role in the spousal analogy of Christ’s union with his Church, for it is, first of all, Christ who loves the Church, and her love for her Bridegroom is only a response to his initiative.

Moreover, Ephesians explains just how Christ loved the Church when it proposes this love for the husband’s imitation: “Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her.”¹⁰ It thus refers to Christ’s death on the cross, which was at once redemptive and spousal, in one act both saving us from our sin, and giving himself to his Bride irrevocably. In exhorting husbands to love their wives in this way, it is not merely the extent of love that is meant—though the completeness of loving unto death is surely included—but also the end for which the love is given. Christ loved the Church, and gave himself up *for her sanctification*. Similarly, authentic love leads the husband to work for the goodness and holiness of his wife. Love leads the husband to recognize her goodness and beauty (both visible and interior) and to be solicitous for its preservation and growth.¹¹

On her part, the bride’s submission to her husband consists primarily in her experience of his love. If he is loving her so as to lead her to the good, it is only natural that she should welcome such influence. But even more, to do so corresponds to her place in the analogy, for her submission “refers to the image of the submission of the Church to Christ, which certainly consists in experiencing his love.”¹² The Church’s submission to Christ is a response to his love for her, which precedes it, and calls it forth. Moreover, his love is for her good and sanctification. Therefore, her submission is not servile, but receptive—it consists in experiencing the love with which he fills her, and makes her better. As his love expresses itself in service for her good, her submission manifests

itself in her reception of his riches. The wife's submission to her husband follows this model.

As John Paul notes, the sacrament of marriage, and the mystery of Christ's union with his Church, are mutually illuminating. On the one hand, the analogy of spousal love helps us to understand the mystery of Christ and the Church. We can describe the Lord's love for us in many ways—it is fatherly, redemptive, generous, and constant—but to understand it as *spousal* captures a unique and profound truth. Spousal love means free and complete self-gift; it means unique and unparalleled intimacy; it means endless and unconditional fidelity. Such an analogy has been used to illuminate God's tender love for mankind since the Old Testament prophets, and, in Ephesians, is applied specifically to the union of Christ with his Church. The marriage analogy helps us to understand Jesus' free and complete gift of himself to us, on the cross and in the Eucharist. With the complementary analogy of Christ as the Head of his Body, it helps us to see also the intimate and irrevocable union that the Lord's gift of himself to his Church effects.

The analogy that illuminates the mystery is also illuminated by the mystery. John Paul states:

While the analogy used in Ephesians clarifies the mystery of the relationship between Christ and the Church, at the same time, *it reveals the essential truth about marriage*, namely, that marriage corresponds to the vocation of Christians only when it mirrors the love that Christ, the Bridegroom, gives to the Church, his Bride, and which the Church (in likeness to the wife who is "subject," and thus completely given) seeks to give back to Christ in return.¹³

Christ and his Church are, therefore, the model after which Christian marriages are to be patterned. For the husband, this means loving as Christ loves—with a love that impels him to give himself totally and irrevocably, a love that seeks the sanctification of his bride. For the wife, being "subject" as the Church is subject means being "completely given" in return—accepting his beneficent influence, and returning her love and her own gift of self just as completely.

In the analogy that both clarifies and is illuminated by the mystery of Christ and his Church, husband and wife play different roles. Ephesians emphasizes the love of the husband, who is called to imitate the salvific and original love of Christ; and the submission of the wife, who is called to image the Church who receives this love and strives to return it. Their roles in the analogy highlight only one aspect of what both are called to do in daily life. Though he is called to be an image of Christ in the analogy, of course, the husband is also a fellow member of the Church, seeking to grow in holiness along with his wife. Therefore, in practice, she will love him so as to work for his sanctification as well, and he will receive and return her love and aid. However, the distinct roles emphasized in Ephesians are crucial in building the analogy, which clarifies for us both the mystery of Christ and his Church, and what John Paul calls "the essential truth about marriage."¹⁴

Conclusion

Much more could certainly be said about the respective roles of husband and wife, especially with regard to the “head of the body” analogy. Grace builds upon nature, and it was surely not arbitrarily, but for reasons corresponding to the natural differences between men and women, that St. Paul was inspired to assign the roles of the analogy as he did. To attribute such a decision to the cultural conditioning of his time, alone, would seem to misunderstand both the perennial relevance of Scripture, and our own gender-differentiated human nature. One might explore, for example, the typically masculine tendency to lead the family in its interactions with the outside world, and the predominantly feminine proclivity for supporting a warm and happy home life, and how such gender specific inclinations might correspond to the head and body analogy. We have left such investigations to those with more psychological and sociological expertise, and have limited ourselves to what seems to us to be the main theological points brought out by John Paul II. In our emphasis on the mutuality of spousal reverence, however, we do not intend to obscure natural differences which exist in the respective roles of the spouses.

The submission which is spoken of in Ephesians is very far from any misogynistic oppression which our modern ears might suspect in it. The wife is called to subordinate herself to her husband, not because of any inferiority, but because of a great dignity and privilege—by their participation in the sacrament of marriage, she and her husband are called to mystically image Christ’s intimate and indissoluble union with his Bride. The submission to which both spouses are called is primarily attributed to the woman because she represents the Church in the analogy. The husband is exhorted to love his wife and to give himself up for her sanctification, corresponding to his role as the image of Christ in the analogy. The image enables us to see more clearly Christ’s spousal love for his Church—his total gift of self, his work for her sanctification, his irrevocable union with her. She, for her part, receives his gifts and adornments, and returns his love.

Being the image of Christ in the analogy certainly does not exempt the husband from the call to submission. The husband is called to love his wife as Christ loved the Church—he is called to imitate the love of the one who gave himself to his Bride completely, who sacrificed himself for her sanctification, and who died so that she might have life. The Lord came “not to be served, but to serve” his Bride; he bore her ridicule, and stooped to wash her feet.¹⁵ Loving as Christ loves can manifest itself in no other way than self-sacrifice and humble service.

Moreover, both spouses are members of the Church, and in that sense find themselves on the same side of the analogy. What distinguishes the spouses in the letter to the Ephesians relates to their different roles in the model, corresponding to their natural differences as male and female; what the spouses have in common, however, stems from their common humanity and its relation to Christ. In this sense, both spouses are equally called to submit to each other out of reverence for Christ, and both are equally called to imitate their Head by loving their spouse so as to seek his or her good and sanctification. Thus, submission is called for *from both sides*—for to submit to one another out of reverence for Christ is to imitate their Lord’s humble service to his Bride.

This mutual submission of married persons to each other out of love for the Lord is a specification of the submission to Christ to which we are all called. As the analogy teaches us, such submission is not servile, but receptive—it consists in receiving his love, and the gifts and riches that that love impels him to lavish upon us for our sanctification. It is a happy servitude that leads to true Christian freedom and joy, for “{his} yoke is easy, and {his} burden is light.”¹⁶

- 1 John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body*, Trans. Michael Waldstein, (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 2006), 89:1. Hereafter abbreviated TOB.
- 2 Ibid. Emphasis original.
- 3 TOB 89:2; Eph 1.
- 4 Eph 5:24-27.
- 5 TOB 89:3.
- 6 TOB 89:4. Emphasis original.
- 7 TOB 89:3. Emphasis original.
- 8 TOB 9:1-5; Gen 2:18.
- 9 TOB 92:6.
- 10 Eph 5:25-26a.
- 11 TOB 92:4: “Love binds the bridegroom (husband) to be concerned for the good of the bride (wife); it commits him to desire her beauty and at the same time to sense this beauty and care for it. What is at stake here is also visible beauty, physical beauty. The bridegroom examines his bride attentively, as though in a creative loving restlessness, whether he will find the good and beauty he desires in her and for her. The good that the one who loves creates with his love in the beloved is like a test of that same love and its measure.”
- 12 TOB 92:6.
- 13 TOB 90:2. Emphasis original.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 Mt 20:28, Mk 10:45; e.g., Mt 27:27-44; Jn 13:1-17.
- 16 Mt 11:29-30.



About Katie Froula

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