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21st Sunday of Year B

I am sure that this weekend when married couples hear the words of St. Paul read at Mass, "Wives should be subordinate to their husbands in everything," there will be considerable elbow-poking, snickering, along with some anger as well. Some might dismiss the line as simply an example of St. Paul's misogyny. And at first glance that might appear to be true, but that would be unfair because Paul is really no hater of women. So, let us see what in fact then, St. Paul is up to in this passage.

St. Paul is trying to apply the new vision of life, which he had received from Jesus Christ, to the particular circumstances of his own day. Here, context is everything. Paul is trying to adapt the message of Jesus, which affirms the dignity and equality of all people, to the rigidly patriarchal structure of society and the family, as it existed in the pagan world of his day, a way of thinking and acting that gave the man, the husband, the father, absolute power over wife, children and servants. St. Paul was trying to apply the understanding he expressed in his letter to Galatians wherein he wrote, "in Christ there is neither Jew nor Gentile, male nor female, slave nor free man," to the pagan, patriarchal notion that the man is ruler of the roost and the woman's place is somewhere in the henhouse. Paul had no easy task ahead of him because, in his own day as our own, people change very slowly, especially when change involves for some having to give up so many of the privileges, rights and entitlements that their society awarded them. Those Christian husbands, living in a pagan society, had to give up a lot of those entitlements when they became disciples of Jesus, That's why most of the attention in this section of Paul's letter is focused on the husbands, rather than on the wives

The revolutionary part of Paul's message comes out clearly in the first line, "Be subordinate to one another, i.e., defer to one another, out of reverence for Christ." This must have come as quite a shock to the patriarchal husbands who did not think they had to defer to anybody in their own home. Paul is attempting to introduce the principle of mutuality, of mutual respect, to his patriarchal society's notion of the institution of marriage, which was rooted in dominance, control and submission. He is taking the givens of his day: the structures, the language, the images, but giving them a much different meaning and interpretation. For example, when Paul says that "the husband is the head of his wife," he adds a phrase that gives it a whole new meaning. He says that the husband is the "head of his wife," just as "Christ is head of the church." Christ's headship is a totally different kind of headship. In the pagan world,

the fact that the husband was the head of his wife meant that he had absolute control over her, but when Paul uses Christ as the model of headship, it is Christ's example of service, of care, of compassion that should be imitated--not the pagan world's use of control, domination, even abuse. So, Paul is trying to bring to the institution of marriage, as he finds it, with its emphasis on hierarchy and domination, some new sense of mutuality, of reciprocity, of respect. That will be the Christian contribution to world culture that in time will transform the institution of marriage.

St. Paul's command to husbands and wives to take up a life of mutual sharing is but a corollary of Jesus' great commandment, "Love God and love your neighbor as yourself." In St. Paul's understanding of marriage, the paradox of Christian love is validated--that in truly loving oneself, one is thereby able to love others. As we come to be more in possession of ourselves, more focused on who we are with our own strengths and limitations, more self-aware, to that degree we are more free to share who we are with another person. The paradox of self-possessed people is that those who do not need each other can best share themselves with each other. Self-possessed people are not possessive people; they are not "needy" people; because they possess themselves, they're better able to give of themselves. Very "needy" people are looking to find from another what they cannot find in themselves. So, they court disaster as they court, usually unbeknownst to the one they love, a scenario of fantastic expectations and unrealizable possibilities that will inevitably transform him or her who first appeared as a miraculous godsend into the most horrible of demons. Again, if we are more tolerant of our own limitations, more realistic in our expectations of others, if we can accept ourselves for who and what we are, then we can more readily accept and love others as they truly are.

Love is blind, but marriage is 20/20 vision. Love is blind when lovers see only what they want to see, both in themselves and in each other. St. Augustine gave this very simple definition of love. He said, "Love means I want you to be you," i.e., I want you to be who you really are; who you are still discovering yourself to be. I want you to be who you are, and not just what you can be for me, not just how you can satisfy my needs and my desires. But this kind of loving requires risk, respect for another's individuality, and the patience to allow for growth, for change, for something new and unexpected to develop in that marriage.

When a marriage really works, when what's supposed to happen does happen, when two people are able to share their strengths and accept their limitations, then we see how over the years the husband-and-wife come to take on the best qualities of each other. Marriages can work--I've seen it happen--and people do change, and change for the better. But they change not from the outside in, not by being "worked

on” or “worked over,” not by being manipulated and controlled, but they change from the inside out, as slowly but decisively each learns from the other, each sees the other modeling what they could be, often in ways they scarcely recognize at the time. They begin to take on some of the best qualities of their spouse.

Finally, in speaking marriage, Paul refers to it as “a great mystery,” “a great foreshadowing. “i.e., there is something going on in marriage that partakes of a higher, greater reality. When a couple is able to live with each other in a mutual giving and receiving of the totality of their lives—if they are really there for each other--they embody the very life of God, the Trinity, for the essence of the Trinity is mutuality, the eternal giving and receiving of love of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. So, for St. Paul, the love that is real within a marriage, within a home, within a family, the most basic of society's institutions, can in time become transformative to touch all the other institutions of society, and enable them to become what they should be. Let us pray, then, whether we be married or single, divorced or widowed, that we can bring the elements of the Christian vision which St. Paul enunciates in today's reading, the elements of reciprocity, of respect, of equality to all our encounters. Then we can transform the institutions of our day, the institutions of family, of state, of society, which still need transforming, into what God would have them be.