

My Body Given for You

A teacher observed that one of the little boys in her class was pensive and withdrawn. “What are you worried about?” she asked. “My parents,” he replied. “Dad and mom work hard all week long to keep me clothed and fed. They buy everything I need for school. They pay for extra things for soccer and basketball. They spend most of their spare time cooking and cleaning and taking me to my sports practices. And they are putting money away so that I can go to college.” The teacher said, “So why are you worried?” The little boy said, “I’m afraid they might try to escape.”

Marriage is hard work. Being married with children is harder work. Sometimes, the temptation to escape is normal. A priest recently told me that he has known several couples who have divorced without any big blow-up. Rather, one spouse said to the other, “I’m just not going to do this anymore.” One spouse decides that she or he is not going to engage in the daily sacrifice and struggle of marriage or caring for the children, so they walk out. They use divorce as an escape hatch.

Marriage is a story of agony and ecstasy! Often, there is so much agony making ends meet, working on healthy relationships, constantly forgiving and reconciling, even caring for a sick spouse or a disabled child. There is so much baggage and messiness, so much sacrifice required. The temptation is to say, “I’m just not going to do this anymore.” Even if they don’t divorce, they might disconnect emotionally by escaping through social media, or by giving more attention to adult friends than to their spouse and children.

In that context, we hear the Letter of Saint Paul to the Ephesians (5:21-32). It begins, “*Be subordinate to one another out of reverence for Christ.*” This is the key to understanding the rest of the reading. What does he mean? If you take one thing away from this reading, it should be this: Look at your relationships through the lens of Christ’s love. Paul is applying this principle to married couples, but it applies to every disciple. Look at your relationships through the lens of Christ’s humble love on the cross.

Gaze on Christ on the cross. Contemplate his faithful and sacrificial love. Ponder that mystery, then apply it to every relationship in your life. “*Husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the church . . . cleansing her by the bath of water with the word*” (Eph. 5:25-26). The bath of water calls to mind washing Peter’s feet and the feet of Judas. The water flowing from his side on the cross is poured over us at Baptism. Christ washes his disciples with faithfulness and mercy.

For the first disciples, the washing of their feet was a transformative moment, especially as they looked back at what happened. He washed them knowing that they would deny and betray him. Jesus stayed true to his friendship, even dying on the cross. “*Husbands love your wives, even as Christ loved the Church and handed himself over for her.*” Can it get any stronger than that? Husbands and wives, view your relationship through the lens of Christ’s humble love.

Paul is challenging the culture. In the Greek culture, the man was the head of the family, but Paul challenges him to lead like Christ, not lording it over his wife, but pouring out his life for her. Paul must have been thinking of what Jesus told the Twelve when he said, “*You know that those who are recognized as rulers over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones make their authority over them felt. But it shall not be so among you. Rather, whoever wishes to be great among you will be your servant; whoever wishes to be first among you will be the slave of all. For the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many*” (Mk. 10:42-45).

Paul applied the mystery of Christ to married life, but his teaching is not perfect. Over the years, we have come to realize that husband and wife have an equality and a shared authority, even though

they have distinct gifts as male and female. But shared authority means mutual service, serving each other like Christ – faithful, forgiving, selfless, and sacrificial. “*Be subordinate to one another out of reverence for Christ*” (Eph. 5:21).

Another possible translation is, “*Subject yourselves to one another out of reverence for Christ.*” “Subject yourselves” implies that you are voluntarily deciding to be a humble servant; no one is imposing that upon you. You do it “*out of reverence for Christ,*” because you are in awe of his love. We are to be slaves to others because that is who Christ is for us. When we keep our eyes fixed on the love flowing from the cross, then we “*live in love as Christ loved us and handed himself over for us*” (Eph. 5:2).

Inspired by his love, we subject ourselves to one another. We serve them, even if they are ornery, or if they ridicule us, or if they act selfishly. Parents are called to do this for children who can be self-centered. Older children should serve younger siblings. Teachers should act this way toward their students. Upper classmen should be servants of students in lower grades. Medical personnel treat their patients this way, even when the patient is sick because he or she refused to be vaccinated.

There is so much talk today about individual rights, but few mention the call to serve others or our responsibility to be selfless. Our culture is self-focused. Americans are repulsed at the thought of subjecting themselves to others. We view freedom from an extremely selfish perspective.

Those who are pro-choice wear t-shirts saying, “My body, my choice.” Some of those who oppose vaccines or masks are using the same slogan, “My body, my choice.” Anyone who says, “My body, my choice” is not in sync with the Gospel. To the pro-choice advocates, the Church says that a woman’s individual rights need to be balanced by the rights of the unborn child.

That same principle applies for vaccinations and masks. Individual rights are to be respected, but they are to be balanced with responsibility to protect all people, especially the most vulnerable. Jesus did not say, “My body, my choice.” Rather he said, “*This is my Body given for you*” (Lk. 22:19).

The best reason to put on a mask or to be vaccinated is to subject yourself to others, like Christ. We put on masks when in close proximity to others because we are called to be their servants. Wearing on a mask is such a small act of humility. The same applies to being vaccinated. We get vaccinated not only to protect ourselves, but also to protect others. It is a small act of love, especially for the elderly and those with health conditions. It is a way to love small children who cannot be vaccinated.

It also protects unborn children. Pregnant women who become ill with COVID-19 are at higher risk for pre-term delivery, low-birth-weight infants, and admission to the Neo-natal ICU (NICU). The vaccine protects their unborn children.

As we begin a new school year, renew your commitment to daily prayer. Always begin prayer by remembering Jesus’ humble love for you, even when you don’t deserve it, especially when you don’t deserve it. Simply receive that love. Be faithful in participating in the Eucharist, primarily because you need to receive his love again and again.

Then ask for the grace to love like Christ. “*Subject yourselves to one another out of reverence for Christ*” (Eph. 5:21). “*Live in love as Christ loved us and handed himself over for us*” (Eph. 5:2).