

“Brothers and sisters: Be subordinate to one another out of reverence for Christ” (Eph 5:21). The letter to the Ephesians compares “marriage to the union between Christ and the Church. The relationship by which the Church willingly submits to Christ and Christ lovingly gives himself for the Church is the model for the relationship between husband and wife in Christian Marriage.”ⁱ

Let us first recall the relationship between Jesus and his Father. Both are coequal, both form the Trinity in conjunction with the Holy Spirit. But there is a Sacred Order, Jesus is obedient to the will of the Father.

Jesus tells us, “The Father and I are one” (Jn 10:30). There is unity of power ... the words and deeds of Jesus are the words and deeds of God the Father (Note 10:30).

- As Jesus is preparing for his passion, an argument breaks out among the disciples about who is the greatest. “The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them and those in authority over them are addressed as ‘Benefactors’; but among you it shall not be so. Rather, let the greatest among you be as the youngest, and the leader as the servant” (Lk 10:25-26).
- A little while later, Jesus enters into the Garden of Gethsemane and prays to his Father. “Father, if you are willing, take this cup away from me; still, not my will but yours be done” (Lk 10:42).

Jesus is subordinate to the will of the Father out of love for his Father but also out of his love for humanity.

In his passion and death, Jesus offers his body and blood for our salvation. The Bridegroom lays down his life for the sake of his beloved bride the church. With his letter to the Ephesians, Saint Paul is calling for a husband to follow the mission of Jesus Christ, and if necessary, lay down his life for the sake of his bride. This is the context for a wife to be subordinate to her husband. She is also to follow the mission of Jesus. In response to the self-sacrificial love of a husband following the example of Christ, she is to follow the example of Jesus and be willing to lay down her life for the sake of her spouse.

In his Theology of the Body, Pope John Paul II tries to help us understand this passage in its sacred context. Saint Paul recommends that spouses be “subject to one another out of reverence for Christ” (Eph 5:21). Marriage has a twofold dimension: reciprocal and communal. “Mutual relations of husband and wife must spring from their common relationship with Christ.”ⁱⁱ

“Wives should be subordinate to their husbands as to the Lord” (Eph 5:22). Saint Paul does not mean that a “husband is ‘master’ of the wife and that the inter-personal pact of marriage is a pact of domination of the husband over his wife. Instead, it expresses another concept: that is, that the wife, in her relationship with Christ - who is the only Lord for both spouses - can and must find the motivation for that relationship with her husband, which springs from the very essence of marriage. and family.”ⁱⁱⁱ Marriage is a sacrament, a gift from God to help spouses grow in holiness and grow in union with God. “The husband and wife are in fact ‘subject to each other,’ they are mutually subordinate.”^{iv}

When the love of God is truly at the center of a lifegiving marriage, the husband and wife are subjected to each other like Jesus in his obedience to the Father. There is a balance that corresponds to the Christian vocation to love God with our whole hearts and to love our neighbor as ourselves.^v “For this is the message you have heard from the beginning: we should love one another... The way we came to know love was that he laid down his life for us; so we ought to lay down our lives for [one another]” (1 Jn 3:11,16).

“Brothers and sisters: Be subordinate to one another out of reverence for Christ” (Eph 5:21). I have spoken of Saint Paul’s letter to the Ephesians in the context of marriage, but we should extend this notion to the way that we should treat others regardless of family relationship. Perhaps you might murmur the way the apostles do in the Gospel. “This saying is hard; who can accept it?” (Jn 6:60). There is something in the American psyche that bristles against being subordinate. If we think that one person is to dominate another person than we misunderstand completely what Saint Paul is saying.

I think of the great stress people live in amidst the never-ending pandemic. For some there is a great mistrust of government. There is a great fear of loss of freedom and control. There is frustration and anger all too often reaching a boiling point. We have lost a sense of sacrifice for the good of the other. We have lost a sense of the common good.

Let us return to the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus was in great agony. “He prayed so fervently that his sweat became like drops of blood falling on the ground” (Lk 22:44). Before he had gone to pray, the disciples had bickered among themselves, now they have worn themselves out and fallen asleep. At this point when Jesus rouses them, Judas steps forward to betray Jesus. Someone responds in violence and strikes the ear of the high priest’s servant cutting it off. And how does Jesus respond. “Jesus said in reply, ‘Stop, no more of this!’ Then he touched the servant’s ear and healed him” (Lk 22:51).

Jesus has the words of eternal life. He leads by example. He submits to his own passion and death for our salvation. We too must pick up our cross and follow Jesus. Christ loves his bride despite her sinfulness, we too must follow his example of self-sacrificial love. “Brothers and sisters: Be subordinate to one another out of reverence for Christ” (Eph 5:21).

ⁱ Pope John Paul II, Wednesday Audience on the Theology of the Body, Aug 11,1982.

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} Ibid.

^v Ibid.