

The Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph

On a day devoted to the holy family, the Catholic Church assigns among the scripture readings one of the bible's most contentious verses about family life: Saint Paul writes to the Colossians, "Wives, be subordinate to your husbands." It is among the optional verses today; the reader may omit those words. I asked for them to be read, so blame me, not the reader. On most Sundays, the readings rotate on a three-year cycle, but this feast has a wrinkle: these readings may be proclaimed each year. Therefore, on two out of three years the reading from Colossians may be completely replaced, and whenever it is read, the controversial line may be omitted. But these rules also mean that Paul's remark about wives may be proclaimed in any Catholic parish worldwide every year on the Feast of the Holy Family. Many people find this troubling.

This is only part of the problem. The command for wives to be subordinate reappears in Ephesians (5:21-22) and in the First Letter of Peter (3:1). In addition, Paul asks women to keep silence in his First Letter to the Corinthians (14:34) and in his First Letter to Timothy (2:11-12). These are painful passages to read especially because some men have blasphemously cited them to justify abuse against women, which has no foundation in Christianity. Significantly, this summer Pope Francis appointed seven women to serve as voting members of the Vatican congregation that oversees the world's Catholic religious orders; the Church has a long history of putting only men in such positions of leadership.

The Catholic Church has some discomfort with these biblical passages. Paul's instructions about the silence of women are not included among any of the readings we ever hear at mass. The Catholic Church permits women to serve as readers and relies on them as teachers in our schools. On this point, it is not women who have been silenced, but Saint Paul. The passages about wives being subordinate appear as optional readings in celebrations such as weddings, the blessing of families, and today's feast, but they are never obligatory in the US.

The lectionary conceals other biblical readings. For example, the passage that a bishop should be married only once (1 Tim 3:2) is never proclaimed on Sundays. Furthermore, we do not take literally such passages as plucking out a sinful eye (Matt 5:29) or those concerning the brothers and sisters of Jesus (Mark 6:3; Matt 13:55-56). The bible is the Word of God, but we believe that some of these words are best understood in the cultural context of their composition.

Catholic weddings take a more respectful view of wives at the critical moment when the couple give their consent. Our church does not ask a bride to say, "I promise to be subordinate." Instead, she says exactly what the groom says: "I promise to be faithful to you, ... to love you and to honor you all the days of my life." One nuptial blessing prays that the groom recognize the bride "as his equal" and that he "show her due honor and cherish her always" (OCM 74).

Whenever women or men hear these controversial passages from the bible, like today's from Colossians, we have every reason to question their suitability for our culture today. Not just a husband, but the entire Catholic Church needs to grow in our appreciation for the leadership that women can offer. In fact, we should all be subordinate to women whenever they speak the truth.

Sunday, December 29, 2019