

## 21st Sunday in Ordinary Time

In conjunction with one of the most sublime gospels in the bible, the conclusion of Jesus' discourse on the bread of life, the lectionary gives us today one of the most controversial epistles in the bible, the conclusion of our series of readings from Ephesians. The conjunction is accidental, but it shows the breadth of Sacred Scripture and the various ways people use it to interpret both the ancient and the modern world.

Writing to the Ephesians, Paul, who says elsewhere that he was unmarried, delivers a moral code for families that was more acceptable in his own culture than it is in the United States today. "Wives should be subordinate to their husbands as to the Lord," Paul writes. "For the husband is head of his wife just as Christ is head of the church." In subsequent verses that we never hear on Sundays, Paul tells slaves to obey their "human masters with fear and trembling." In Paul's worldview, men took charge of everyone in the house: wives, children and slaves. We think of ourselves as a more enlightened society, having abolished slavery and improved the lot of women, but black people in our country still suffer prejudice, and women still have not achieved equality with men in positions of decision-making or in salaries. The Catholic Church is no exception, even though Pope Francis has put women in greater positions of authority in his circle of advisers, the Roman curia, and in the direction of the current synod.

One great sign of religious respect for women today is the Catholic marriage ceremony. In the past, the groom gave a ring to the bride, but he did not wear one from her. The priest blessed the bride, but not the groom. Today these symbols enjoy greater equality, and the groom and the bride express their consent to be married by saying exactly the same words to each other. These include the promise to love and honor, but not the word "obey"—or, for that matter, "subordinate." One nuptial blessing reminds the groom that his bride is his equal. The official description of the Catholic wedding procession implies that the ceremony begins as the couple walk down the aisle together. Yet our culture still promotes the custom where the father walks his daughter down the aisle and presents her to the groom, one male passing her off to another male. Even though we can look back at the language Paul used in Ephesians as being out of touch, in some respects we haven't progressed as much as we may think.

What can be rescued from this controversial epistle is Paul's esteem for marriage and his clever use of marriage as an image for the love of God for the church. Paul writes, "Christ loved the church and handed himself over for her... that she might be holy and without blemish." Christ gave it all up for our benefit, and that is the model for husbands and wives.

Marriage begins with the highest of ideals, which then develop and mature. Sadly, at times husbands and wives do not hand themselves over to each other, but rather take advantage of their partner for the sake of selfish gains. All of us, single or married, do well to imitate the love of Christ for the church in the way we treat one another. Married couples have an opportunity to do this most exquisitely, but each of us, when tempted toward selfish ways, do well to remember the model of Jesus. When we subordinate ourselves to help others, we subordinate ourselves to Christ.