

of the text, we should add that the whole letter ends with a stupendous encouragement to spiritual battle (see Eph 6:10–20), with short recommendations (see Eph 6:10–20) and a final greeting (see Eph 6:23–24). That appeal for spiritual battle seems to be logically based on the argumentation of the whole letter. It is, so to speak, the explicit point of arrival of its main guiding lines.

Having before our eyes in this way the overall structure of the whole letter to the Ephesians, we will try in the first analysis to clarify the meaning of the words, “Be subject to one another in the fear of Christ” (Eph 5:21), addressed to husbands and wives.

### The Spouses: “Reciprocally Subject in the Fear of Christ”

## 89 *General Audience of August 11, 1982* (*Insegnamenti*, 5, no. 2 [1982]: 204–7)

1. TODAY WE BEGIN A MORE DETAILED analysis of the passage in Ephesians 5:21–33 in which the author addresses the spouses and calls on them to “*be subject to one another in the fear of Christ*” (Eph 5:21).

What is at issue here is a *relationship* with two dimensions or *on two levels*: reciprocal and communitarian. One specifies and characterizes the other. The reciprocal relations of husband and wife must spring from their common relation with Christ. The author of the letter speaks about the “fear of Christ” in a sense analogous to his words about the “fear of God.” In this case, it is not a question of a fear or fright that is a defensive attitude in the face of the threat of an evil, but a question of reverence for holiness, for the *sacrum*; it is a question of *pietas*, which the language of the Old Testament expressed with the term “fear of God” (see, e.g., Ps 103:11; Prov 1:7; 23:17; Sir 1:11–16). In effect, such *pietas*, which springs from the profound consciousness of the mystery of Christ, must constitute the basis of the reciprocal relations between the spouses.

2. Like the immediate context, the text chosen by us also has a “*parenetic*” character, that is, the character of moral instruction. The author of the letter wants to point out to the spouses how their reciprocal relations and all their behavior should be formed. He draws the

specific indications and directives as a conclusion from the mystery of Christ presented at the beginning of the letter. This mystery must be spiritually present in the reciprocal relation of the spouses. Penetrating their hearts, kindling in them that holy "fear of Christ" (that is, *pietas*), the mystery of Christ must lead them to "be subject to one another": the mystery of Christ, that is, the mystery of the election of each of them from all eternity in Christ "to be adoptive sons" of God.

3. The expression that opens our passage of Ephesians 5:21-33, which we have approached by an analysis of the remote and immediate context, has an utterly unique eloquence. The author speaks about the mutual submission of the spouses, husband and wife, and in this way shows also how to understand *the words* he writes afterward *about the submission of the wife to the husband*. We read, "Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord" (Eph 5:22). When he expresses himself in this way, the author does not intend to say that the husband is the "master" of the wife and that the interpersonal covenant proper to marriage is a contract of domination by the husband over the wife. He expresses a different concept instead, namely, that it is in her relationship with Christ—who is for both spouses the one and only Lord—that the wife can and should find the motivation for the relationship with her husband, which flows from the very essence of marriage and the family. This relationship is nevertheless not one-sided submission. According to the teaching of Ephesians, marriage excludes this element of the contract, which weighed on this institution and at times does not cease to weigh on it. Husband and wife are, in fact, "subject to one another," mutually subordinated to one another. *The source* of this reciprocal submission lies in Christian *pietas* and *its expression is love*.

4. The author of the letter underlines this love in a particular way when he turns to husbands. He writes, "And you, husbands, love your wives," and with this way of expressing himself he takes away any fear that could have been created (given the contemporary sensibility) by the earlier sentence, "Wives, be subject to your husbands." Love excludes every kind of submission by which the wife would become a servant or slave of the husband, an object of one-sided submission. Love makes the *husband simultaneously subject to*

the wife, and *subject* in this *to the Lord himself*, as the wife is to the husband. The community or unity that they should constitute because of marriage is realized through a reciprocal gift, which is also a mutual submission. Christ is the source and at the same time the model of that submission—which, being reciprocal “in the fear of Christ,” confers on the conjugal union a deep and mature character. Many factors of a psychological and moral nature are so transformed in this source and before this model that they give rise, I would say, to a new and precious “fusion” of the conduct and relations on both sides.

### Analogy and Mystery (At the Foundation of the Sacramentality of Marriage)

5. The author of Ephesians is not afraid to accept the concepts that were characteristic of the mentality and customs of that time; he is not afraid of speaking about the submission of the wife to the husband; he is, in addition, not afraid (also in the last verse of the text quoted by us) of recommending to the wife “to have reverence toward her husband” (Eph 5:33). In fact, it is certain that, when husband and wife are subject to one another “in the fear of Christ,” everything will find a just balance, that is, such as to correspond to their Christian vocation in the mystery of Christ.

6. Certainly, our contemporary sensibility is different, mentality and customs are different, and the social position of women in comparison with men is different. Nevertheless, the underlying parenetic principle that we find in Ephesians remains the same and bears the same fruits. Reciprocal submission “in the fear of Christ”—a submission born on the foundation of Christian *pietas*—always forms the deep and firm supporting structure of the *community of the spouses*, in which the true “*communion*” of persons is realized.

7. The author of Ephesians, who began his letter with a magnificent vision of the eternal plan of God for humanity, does not limit himself to highlighting only the traditional aspects of morality or the ethical aspects of marriage, but goes beyond the limits of such teaching and, in writing on the reciprocal relation of the spouses, uncovers in it the dimension of the same mystery of Christ, whose herald and

apostle he is. "Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the Church, he who is the Savior of his body. And as the Church is subject to Christ, so also wives ought to be subject to their husbands in everything. And you, husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the Church and gave himself for her" (Eph 5:22-25). In this way, *the teaching* that belongs to this parenetic part of the letter is in some sense *inserted into the very reality of the mystery* hidden from eternity in God and revealed to humanity in Jesus Christ. In the letter to the Ephesians, we are witnesses, I would say, of a particular encounter of this mystery with the very essence of the vocation to marriage. How should this encounter be understood?

8. In the text of Ephesians, the encounter presents itself first of all as a great *analogy*. We read, "Wives, be subject to your husbands *as* you are to the Lord." This is the first component of the analogy. "For the husband is the head of the wife *as* Christ is the head of the Church." This is the second component that clarifies the first and shows its cause. "And *as* the Church is subject to Christ, *so* also wives ought to be subject to their husbands." The relationship of Christ with the Church, which had been presented earlier, is now expressed as a relationship of the Church with Christ, and the next component of the analogy is contained here. Finally, "And you, husbands, love your wives, *as* Christ loved the Church and gave himself for her." This is the final component of the analogy. The remainder of the text of the letter develops the underlying thought contained in the passage just quoted, and the whole text of Ephesians 5:21-23 is permeated by the same analogy: that is, the reciprocal relationship between the spouses, husband and wife, should be understood by Christians *according to the image of the relationship between Christ and the Church*.

## 90 *General Audience of August 18, 1982* (*Insegnamenti*, 5, no. 2 [1982]: 245-48)

1. WHEN WE ANALYZED the relevant parts of Ephesians last Wednesday, we noted that Christians should understand the reciprocal relationship between spouses, husband and wife, according to the image of the relationship between Christ and the Church.

This relationship is a revelation and realization in time of the mystery of salvation, of the election of love "hidden" from eternity in God. In this revelation and realization, the mystery of salvation includes the particular feature of spousal love in the relationship of Christ with the Church, and for this reason one can express it most adequately by going back to the analogy of the relationship that exists—that should exist—between husband and wife in marriage. This *analogy clarifies the mystery*, at least to a certain degree. Indeed, it seems that, according to the author of Ephesians, this analogy is complementary to that of the "Mystical Body" (see Eph 1:22–23) when we try to express the mystery of the relationship of Christ with the Church and—going back even further—the mystery of God's eternal love for man, for humanity: the mystery that is expressed and realized in time through the relationship of Christ with the Church.

2. If, as has been said, this analogy illuminates the mystery, it itself in turn *is illuminated by that mystery*. The spousal relationship that unites the spouses, husband and wife, must—according to the author of Ephesians—help us to understand the love that unites the Christ with the Church, the reciprocal love of Christ and the Church in which the eternal divine plan of man's salvation is realized. Nevertheless, the meaning of the analogy is not exhausted here. While the analogy used in Ephesians clarifies the mystery of the relationship between the Christ and the Church, at the same time *it reveals the essential truth about marriage*, namely, that marriage corresponds to the vocation of Christians only when it mirrors the love that Christ, the Bridegroom, gives to the Church, his Bride, and which the Church (in likeness to the wife who is "subject," and thus completely given) seeks to give back to Christ in return. This is the redeeming, saving love, the love with which man has been loved by God from eternity in Christ, "In him he chose us before the creation of the world to be holy and immaculate before him" (Eph 1:4).

3. Marriage corresponds to the vocation of Christians as spouses only when precisely that love is mirrored and realized in it. This will become clear if we attempt to *reread the Pauline analogy in the opposite direction*, that is, beginning with the relationship of Christ with the Church and turning next to the relationship between husband and

wife in marriage. The text uses the tone of exhortation: "Wives, be subject to your husbands...as the Church is subject to Christ." And on the other hand, "You, husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the Church." These expressions show that what is at issue is a moral obligation. Yet, to be able to recommend such an obligation, one must admit that the very essence of marriage contains *a particle of the same mystery*. Otherwise, this whole analogy would hang in a void. The invitation with which the author of Ephesians addresses the spouses, that they model their reciprocal relationship according to the likeness of Christ's relationship with the Church ("*as—so*"), would be deprived of a real basis, as if it had no ground under its feet. This is the logic of the analogy used in the text quoted from Ephesians.

4. As one can see, this analogy works in two directions. While it allows us, on the one hand, to understand better the relationship of Christ with the Church, it permits us, on the other hand, to penetrate more deeply into the essence of the marriage to which Christians are called. It shows in some sense the way in which this marriage, in its deepest essence, *emerges from the mystery* of God's eternal love for man and humanity: from the salvific mystery that Christ's spousal love fulfills in time for the Church. If we begin with the words of Ephesians 5:22-33, we can develop the thought contained in the great Pauline analogy in two directions: both in the direction of a deeper understanding of the Church, and in the direction of a deeper understanding of marriage. In our considerations, we will follow first the latter direction, keeping in mind that at the basis of the understanding of marriage in its very essence stands Christ's spousal relationship with the Church. We should analyze that relationship even more carefully to establish—presupposing the analogy with marriage—how marriage becomes a *visible sign of the eternal divine mystery*, according to the image of the Church united with Christ. In this way, Ephesians leads us to *the very foundations of the sacramentality* of marriage.

### **An Additional Aspect of the Analogy—Head and Body**

5. Let us, therefore, carry out a detailed analysis of the text. When we read in Ephesians that "the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the Church, he who is the Savior of his body"

(Eph 5:23), we can assume that the author, who had already explained earlier that the submission of the wife to the husband as head should be understood as a reciprocal submission "in the fear of Christ," goes back to the concept rooted in the mentality of his time, in order to express first of all the truth about the relationship of Christ with the Church, that is, that Christ is the head of the Church. He is head as "Savior of his body." The Church is precisely that body, which—being subject in everything to Christ as her head—receives from him everything by which she becomes and is his body, that is, the fullness of salvation as a gift of Christ, who "gave himself for her" to the end. Christ's "gift of self" to the Father through obedience to the point of death on the cross takes on a strictly ecclesiological character here. "*Christ loved the Church and gave himself for her*" (Eph 5:25). Through a total gift that springs from love, he *formed* the Church *as his body* and continually builds her, thus becoming her head. As head, he is the Savior of his body and, at the same time, as Savior, he is the head. As head and Savior of the Church, he is also Bridegroom of his Bride.

6. The Church is herself in the degree to which she, as body, receives from Christ her head the whole gift of salvation as a fruit of Christ's love and of his giving for the Church: fruit of Christ's giving to the end. That gift of self to the Father through obedience to the point of death (see Phil 2:8) is at the same time, according to Ephesians, an act of "giving himself for the Church." In this expression, *redeeming love* transforms itself, I would say, *into spousal love*: by giving himself for the Church, with the same redeeming act, Christ united himself once and for all with her as the Bridegroom to the Bride, as the husband with the wife, giving himself through all that is included once and for all in his "giving himself" for the Church. In this way, the mystery of the redemption of the body conceals within itself in some sense the mystery "of the marriage of the Lamb" (see Rev 19:7). Because Christ is the head of the body, the whole salvific gift of redemption penetrates the Church as the body of that head, and continually forms the deepest essential substance of her life. He forms her in the spousal way, given that in the quoted text the analogy of body and head passes over into the analogy of bridegroom and bride, or rather of husband and wife. This is shown by the immediately following passages of the text, to which we will turn next.