

## **Saint Paul and the States in Life Marriage and Consecrated Life**

The Epistle to the Ephesians has a very developed theology of marriage. The Apostle Paul describes the “mystery of the Church and the sacramentality of marriage” in what Pope John Paul II called “the immediate context of the letter as a whole.” In his Wednesday audiences on the Theology of the Body he carefully develops a meditation on marriage in the context of the Church and her relationship to Jesus Christ, the Bridegroom. In addition, the Pope spent time in describing the vocation of one called to consecrated virginity or celibacy in light of the spousal nature of the human person, which complements the married life and by its renunciation of marriage and family as a good rather than as something evil or worldly to manifest its radical following of Christ and the understanding of human love as something sacred. We will be reflecting upon the insights and teaching of Pope John Paul II on the words of Saint Paul in our consideration of the sacrament of marriage and the consecrated life.

There are two main guiding lines in the Epistle to the Ephesians. The Pope wrote:

The first is the mystery of Christ, which is realized in the Church as an expression of the divine plan for man’s salvation; the second is the Christian vocation as the model of life of baptized persons and particular communities, corresponding to the mystery of Christ or to the divine plan for the salvation of man.

The relationships within the family are to be the kind of relationships that are nurtured and lived in the wider context of the Church at large. The Pope calls these relationships “reciprocal and communitarian”. Values such as obedience, mutual subjection, reverence for God and for holiness, proper roles and responsibilities. He wrote that reverence for the mystery of Christ “must constitute the basis of the reciprocal relations between the spouses.

We must first reflect upon the nature of human marriage. In the first set of Wednesday audiences, the Holy Father goes into great depth reflecting upon the creation of man and woman and the nature of their lives before and after the Fall. The disastrous results of the original sin, while wounding and separating man and woman from God and one another, did not destroy certain integral qualities of their very persons and of their relationship. Marriage is the “primordial sacrament” which means that God intended a man and a woman to be in a permanent, indissoluble and holy union, a life of complete self-donation and fruitfulness in the bearing and raising of children. The Fall did not destroy this reality. But it changed man’s ability to love and be loved. The story of salvation history shows the catastrophic results of the effects of sin from one generation to the next. It is in the context of Christ’s teaching on marriage in the Sermon on the Mount where he brings to the forefront the truth that “from the beginning” man was to enter into a covenant of love through marriage. But the hardness of men’s hearts created a situation where divorce, allowed by Moses for certain situations, had become part of life. Christ teaches definitively that a valid marriage cannot be dissolved by any human power. He shows the reality of what His redemptive sacrifice will restore: man and woman will once again be given the grace to love each other with the love of God in a sacramental,

God-filled union. No one or no power would be able to break this bond once it is ratified and consummated in the marriage act. This radical teaching is followed by his teaching on “purity of heart” where he shocks his listeners and continues to shock men and woman of every age with the teaching that even looking lustfully at another is the same as committing an act of adultery. The interior life of the believer must be purified of all self-seeking, especially in the area of sexuality, because in order to see God, the heart must be pure. This purity means that nothing is placed before the Law of God or His divine Love. Lustful thoughts and actions, committed with deliberation and full consent of the will, do not elevate man but reduce him to mere instinct and disordered desire. The holiness of married life consists in the radical commitment of the spouses, aided and elevated by the Sacrifice of Christ, to love one another as “persons”, as beloved and unrepeatable manifestations of God’s goodness and love, as His very image. This is the sacramentality of marriage that the Church continues to teach today. Although this is scoffed at and ridiculed, it meets the very longing and desires of every human heart to be loved as someone precious and respected, not to be used as a mere means of pleasure for another, but held in reverence and awe.

Pope John Paul wrote that

“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.”

Christ is the perfect Spouse. He has given Himself completely to His Church, His Bride. This spousal love is to be manifested in the love that a husband has for his wife. As Christ becomes one with His Bride to become the Church, His Mystical Body, so do a man and woman in marriage become “one flesh.” This does not blur the individuality of the persons; the Pope makes clear that the subjection of the wife to her husband, in imitation of the Church to Christ, “shows the love of one who has loved by giving ‘himself for her.’ This love is the image and above all the model of the love which a husband must show his wife in marriage, when both are subject to one another ‘in the fear of Christ.’” Although modern ears find this message “dissonant” with patriarchy and the unjust subjection of women, the Christian understanding is far from upholding a common misunderstanding of these words that somehow women are inferior to men and men must be brutes and tyrants, running their marriages and homes as despots. The true meaning of this passage is that the woman is subject to her husband only in the same way that the Church is subject to Christ; His self-giving redemptive love is the safeguard against tyranny. He only wants what is best for His Beloved. The husband, in imitation of Christ, must then only want what is best for his spouse. This is the authentic hermeneutic or interpretation of this text. It is not a dated, societal tradition. It is rooted in the very essence of Christ’s love for the Church and her subjection to Him. But the Pope makes a strong case that “mutual subjection” that comes later in the Pauline texts is the key to understanding this in the sacrament of marriage. It makes each person equal in dignity and respects the nature of married love.

Although this is a very short summary of sublime teaching that you can read and meditate upon in the Pope's Wednesday audiences, we have touched upon a few central themes. There is another theme that I want to mention. It is the centrality of Christ. He is the center of the mystery of which we are contemplating. It is not a merely human relationship or institution. It is the Person of Christ, blessing humanity in every way through His Redemptive death and resurrection and glorification, who gives marriage its sacred identity. Mere human marriage, without benefit of the Sacrament of marriage, reflects a certain truth to God's plan. It is only in the union of two baptized Christians, a man and a woman, who live this mystery of redemptive love and salvation, who mirror to the world the great dignity of the human person in Christ and the great love that God has for each one of us.

Let us turn now to the vocation to consecrated virginity or celibacy. Saint Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians is well-known and a valuable source for our meditation. The Pope said in one of his Wednesday audiences, "we encounter in Paul the question of the reciprocal relation between marriage and celibacy or virginity as a question that troubled the minds of the first generation of the confessors of Christ". There is one very important point: Paul speaks of continence for the sake of the Kingdom as a counsel and not a command. The decision to remain single for God must be freely chosen; only then can it be for the "sake of the Kingdom of God" and elevates the person to the radical imitation of Christ. He does not prefer celibacy/virginity over marriage. He merely says that one who freely renounces the married life for God "does well." This is because, in his own words, "The unmarried person is anxious about what is the Lord's, how to please the Lord" (1 Cor 7, 32)...This statement embraces the whole field of man's personal relationship with God. "To please God"—the expression is found in ancient books of the Bible—is a synonym of life in God's grace and expresses the attitude of the one who seeks God, or who behaves according to his will so as to be pleasing to him; ...following the footsteps of Christ."

Those who consecrate themselves to Christ in celibacy or virginity, our monastics, priests and consecrated single men and women, devote themselves to Christ by the evangelical counsel of chastity, they cleave to Him, as our married members live for one another in Christ. They renounce a human spouse for the complete fidelity to Christ, the one Spouse. Both states in life live a complete dedication to God; those who live their spousal relationship with Christ in celibacy or virginity must take their commitment as seriously as in married love. It is not for merely being available for the work of the Church or to be free for service. This renunciation must be made in order to "be pleasing to Christ", to be able to follow Him in His footsteps in a radical and unconditional self-giving.

The crisis of vocations to the priesthood and the consecrated life, both religious and secular, has been in the false understanding of the single state as being a freedom from family or marital commitment in order to do more things. This is based in a worldly belief that in being freed from family and spouse the individual is able to do more or be more for activity. The real purpose of consecrated celibacy or virginity is to be available to the Lord in prayer and penance, in contemplation of divine realities, as the Second

Vatican Council has stated. The celibate or virginal life, consecrated to Christ alone, must manifest to the Church and to the world the reality of the Kingdom of God. This is not the norm; most are called to Christian married life. What the consecrated life is meant to signify is the absolute primacy of God. Christian married life is to signify Christ's love for the Church and Her love for Christ. Both states in life must see the beauty and importance of one another. Only when there has been a restoration of the authentic understanding and appreciation of both married and consecrated life will the Church be a full sign to the world of Christ's Kingship.

Love is the vocation of all men and women. It is lived by most in the Sacrament of Marriage that is faithful and fruitful. It is lived by some by embracing the evangelical counsel of chastity in celibacy or virginity to manifest the primacy of God in all. Only in Christ do the two states in life converge and find their ultimate meaning. In the next life, there will be no marrying and giving in marriage. All will be united with God in an ultimate communion of life and love. Both states in life reveal the true destiny of man in its fullness. They must be seen as two parts of the whole. The spousal love between man and woman in marriage is the same spousal love that the celibate/virgin lives in anticipation with Christ until all things are brought to fulfillment. Those who live in married love receive "their own gift," in the words of the Apostle to which John Paul II adds, "the grace proper to this choice, of this way of living...The gift received by persons who live in marriage is different from the one received by persons who live in virginity...; nevertheless, it is a true "gift from God"...adapted to their vocation in life."

In the Institute of Saint Joseph we have both married persons who make a consecration to live the evangelical counsels according to the Sacrament of Marriage, to live chastity that is within the rights of the marriage covenant yet faithful to the teachings of Jesus that lustful thoughts and actions be seen as contrary to following Him. We also have priests, single laity and monastics to make a full renunciation of marriage in order to be fully united with Christ in a vow of chastity that makes present the Kingdom of God in their lives of spousal love for Him alone. This is the Pauline teaching of the way the states in life should complement and support one another. This reveals the true teaching of the Gospel that only the pure of heart may see God.