

Twentyfirst Sunday of Ordinary Time

Submitting to Love

August 26, 2018

Fr. Tim Clancy, S.J.

Wives submit to your husbands, husbands love your wives. What turmoil have these words caused! Turmoil because Paul's marital advice presumes a practice of marriage which is foreign to us today. In ancient society people rarely married for love. Rather marriages were arranged by the bride and groom's family. Often enough husband and wife did not even know each other when they were married. Thus Paul needs to exhort husbands to come to love their wives. In the ancient practice of arranged marriages love was something you grew into over the years. And while today we may love before we marry, our love cannot remain what it was on our wedding day. As heady and exhilarating as such love is, it is but a pale shadow to what lies in store ahead, if both husband and wife continue to get to know one another ever more intimately, deal with one another ever more honestly, care for one another ever more generously, whether richer or poorer, better or worse, in sickness and in health till death do they part.

Paul's admonition to wives to submit to their husbands must be understood in this same context. In the ancient world women were normally married soon after reaching puberty. They had to if their people were to remain strong. With the high rate of infant mortality, with famine, with war, with disease, every woman of childbearing age was needed to be bearing children just to keep the population stable. Many early Christian virgin martyrs were killed precisely because they were thought to be shirking their family and even civic duty. Men though tended to marry later—in their late twenties. For a man had first to make something of himself, he had to prove to the father of his bride that he could be a good provider and a faithful husband. Thus for example Joseph. Tradition has it he was at least twice Mary's age. Where else could Jesus' brothers and sisters have come from if Mary remained a virgin all her life? And he had brothers and sisters: the gospels have a story of them with the mother wanting to stop his ministry for fear he was out of control. So too both Paul and Acts refer to James, the brother of the Lord, who took over leadership of the Jesus movement after Pentecost until he himself was martyred.

The age disparity between Mary and Joseph was commonplace. Add to her youth, the fact that the young girl getting married not have received any formal education, in fact that she would not have had much experience out in the public world at all—true even today in most of the Middle East, where girls are not supposed to venture outside the home without a male relative as chaperone, and one can begin to see the wisdom of wives submitting to their husband's instruction. Indeed, part of the romance of married life in the ancient world was how the husband would teach his wife about the wide world outside the home. He would show his love for her by educating her, and she would show her willingness to learn by submitting to his teachings. It is in this way that the wife's relationship with her husband mirrors the relationship of the Church itself to Christ himself as her teacher and Lord.

We live in a different world. Differences between husband and wife, whether in age or in education is not nearly so great. In fact it may well be the wife who has the greater education or the better paying job in the family. Now these changes within the modern practice of marriage does not make Paul's exhortations obsolete, but they do render them one-sided. Marriages are now between equals. Not only ought wives to submit to their husbands, but now husbands ought also to submit to their wives. Or to put it better, husband and wife both need to submit to the new relationship they are creating between them, a relationship whose intimacy enables each to transcend the boundary of their own skin and embrace their beloved as their other self. Both ought to submit to the law of love—a law calling for generosity and patience, humility and tenderness, honesty and forgiveness—a law in short calling for the free and unstinting gift of oneself to one's beloved.

In the first reading from the Book of Joshua we hear the voice of young love, bold and passionate, as the Jews formally choose to ally themselves to the God who had led them out of slavery in Egypt and into the Promised land lying before them. In the Gospel we hear the voice of mature love, tested and true. When Jesus is losing many of his followers, them complaining that his teaching was too hard to accept, he turns to the Twelve and asks them if they too intend to desert him. Simon Peter steps forward. He does not deny that Jesus teaching is hard. But speaking out of the kind of grounded committed love that we can only pray all marriages can mature into, he simply says "Master, to whom shall we go?"

Now the teaching that people are finding hard to accept is not that of Paul's first reading, of course, but of what we have heard over the past couple of weeks from the Gospel of John—that Jesus is the bread of life, and that to share in that life, we must commit ourselves wholly to him, to the point of him becoming part of us, and us part of him. To the point of eating his flesh and drinking his blood, that we might become his very flesh and blood, the Body of Christ in our day in our world.

May we all be blessed with a love that never ceases to grow and to deepen, a love whose roots intertwine our souls. May we each cultivate such a love not only towards our beloved but also to our common beloved, Christ, who lovingly instructs us in his ways, so that at the hour of our death when Jesus comes to ask us where we want to go, we too can say “to whom else shall we go? You have the words of everlasting life.