

HOMILY - FEAST OF THE HOLY FAMILY - YEAR C

I once saw a cartoon in a newspaper in which a preacher begins by saying, “We have just heard one of the most difficult and controversial passages in all of Sacred Scripture. So we’re just going to skip it.” When one hears the passage in St. Paul’s Letter to the Colossians about wives being subordinate to their husbands, one may be tempted to take that approach. But in so doing one would be ignoring St. Paul’s timeless theology and advice regarding the complementarity of male and female.

The first thing one should note is that St. Paul is not recommending some sort of domination by the husband. In the letter to the Ephesians, he says that a husband should sacrifice himself for his wife as Christ did for the Church, and begins a similar passage by saying “husbands and wives, be submissive to each other.” Eph. 5:21-23. Likewise, when he says, “husbands, love your wives” he obviously does not mean that wives should not also love their husbands. Instead, St. Paul is focusing his advice on the aspect of matrimonial success that is, generally at least, the most difficult for each one to maintain. Men, for our part, frequently do not think much about showing love in verbal or expressive form. Men tend to live out love primarily by providing for their wives and being sure that the world respects the family. And this tendency is entirely natural. Among other things, what St. Paul is cautioning men to do is to be sure that they also let wives know that they love them by expressing their love and making sacrifices beyond what is needed. Women for their part, very much want to act out their love by expressing love and becoming very involved in the lives of their beloved. And this tendency is also very natural. Among other things, what St. Paul warns is that wives should understand that this involvement should be balanced by a willingness to let others have their way too, a recognition that even their good ideas may not be the right ones for the present moment.

One can see these different approaches in a different context, for example, when a daughter tells her parents that she is engaged to be married. The father’s immediate response will likely be to make sure that her fiancée will provide for her, uphold her rights, and earn respect for the family. If he is satisfied about these things, he will generally not worry much about the details of the wedding itself. The mother, while certainly concerned with these things, will generally want to be very involved in planning the wedding and reception and even decorating the new home. C.S. Lewis noted these differences when he observed that most men think of moral law primarily in terms of respecting people’s rights, while most women tend to think of moral law primarily in terms of doing things for other people. Both are rightful aspects of a good life, and men and women help each other by bringing the male and female perspective into a marriage.

This complementarity brings us to the nature of marriage and family itself. It is particularly important to understand the basis for marriage in this age, when heathen barbarians in Hollywood mansions and judges robes, many boasting of numerous years of mis-education, seem to have lost the common sense that most normal people in human history have naturally had. As Lewis notes in his book *Perelandra* there is a masculinity and femininity in all of creation. That is why, in languages that divide their nouns into masculine and feminine genders, some nouns, such as mountain, fire and air, are almost always masculine, while other nouns, such as land, water and earth, are almost always feminine. St. Francis of Assisi recognized

this masculinity and femininity in his famous canticle of the Sun, in which he praised God for and through Brother Sun, Sister Moon, Brother Fire, Sister Water, Brother Wind, and Mother Earth. As described in the creation account of Genesis, God brought creation to its high point by creating the first couple, Adam and Eve: “male and female He created them” in His divine image. They were to take the complementary aspects of creation and humanity together in matrimony, which was there at the beginning before any government, economy, or nation, there to be the basis of all other things on earth.

But with the Fall, all sorts of corruptions entered into the world, with even the Chosen People of God allowing divorce and even polygamy in some cases, and with worse corruptions in pagan cultures, corruptions that many self-proclaimed progressives would reduce this nation to. Thus, when Jesus came to reestablish the order of humanity and the order of creation, one of the central things he did was recall the original state of marriage and prohibit divorce among Christians, saying “What God has joined, let no man tear asunder.” Matt. 19:6. But, as with all of creation, He did more than restore marriage, He raised the institution to a divine level, taking the Church as His bride, and thus making Christian marriage an image of His union with the Church, loving, faithful, live-giving, grace filled. The Holy Family was and is a first promise of this union, not a marriage as marriages are usually lived out in conjugal relations, but something elevated to the level of the angels. St. Joseph, the model of quiet strength, took on the most exalted role among human father, that of protecting and providing for Jesus and Mary, the greatest charge who could be given. And Mary, the virgin Mother, took on the quintessentially maternal role of bearing her divine child, prayerfully requesting His first miracle, and then poignantly letting go for Him to set forth on His public ministry. They are the models throughout the ages both for married couples and for those who live out this complementarity consecrated in the Church: priests who, on behalf of Christ, take the Church as their mystical bride, and sisters and nuns who, on behalf of the Church take Christ as their mystical husband.

Jesus is now in heaven, God and man, as our Savior; Mary is there as our Queen and Mother; and Joseph, along with St. Michael defends the Church against her enemies as he did for Jesus so long ago. And, if we are willing to live out with courage and faithfulness our vocations in life, the call to live out masculinity and femininity in support of the kingdom of God, we too will find at the end of all things, that these vocations were the preparation for entering into the final banquet as the New Jerusalem comes as a bride prepared for her husband Jesus. For “blessed are the pure of heart, they will see God.” Matt. 5:8.