Mutual Submission

A Homily by Reverend Robert Gillelan

Ephesians 5:21-33

Brothers and sisters: “Be subordinate to one another out of reverence for Christ.” Everyone skips over that and goes right to, “Wives should be subordinate to their husbands.” And for decades, Paul has been branded a misogynist because of that.

But let's consider what Paul is really saying here and what he isn't saying. First of all, Paul, you know, speaking to the Ephesians in the area of Greece, is simply affirming the Greco-Roman household - how those households were set up at his time.

So he's not really saying anything new here. And in fact, as a former rabbi or Pharisee, a former Jew, he is also likely affirming, at least implicitly, the order of creation: that God created man first, and from man God created woman, thereby in the Jewish line making woman somewhat subordinate to man.

So he's affirming the social order, he is confirming the theological order of creation, and then he's affirming a practical order. Remember what I said on Sunday in my homily about widows?

Married women who lose their husbands, what happens to them? They have no male protector and no male provider.

And so in that way there is kind of this economic and legal dependence on the man in their marriage. So in this way, Paul is simply affirming what the social order is of the day: that in marriage, women are subordinate to their husbands.

But then he says something that is very, very, very groundbreaking. It's that very first sentence: “Brothers and sisters, be subordinate to one another out of reverence for Christ.” Wow.

“Be subordinate to one another out of reverence for Christ.” There he's speaking about a mutuality. Not a subjugation or a hierarchy, but he's saying that in marriage there should be this mutual love and respect.

This is pretty revolutionary, because let's face it, in that patriarchal society, women were often treated as property. So this is really a step up in acknowledging the dignity of women and the dynamic of marriage, that there should be this mutuality.

So Paul is not really undermining the order of creation or the social order. What he is saying is: don't treat your wives like property. Treat them as Christ treats his Church. And that would be the sacrificial love.

So Paul is actually taking this legal institution of marriage and sacramentalizing it. He's giving it its beautiful theological meaning, adding to it mutual respect and sacrificial love.

So now we've cleared all that up. The next time somebody quotes to you, “Well, Paul is a misogynist because he said, ‘Wives should be submissive to their husbands,’” now you have the ammunition to explain to them why that's not true at all.

But that Paul is taking marriage and the image of Christ and his Church, and he is fashioning something very, very beautiful and profound out of it. So today, let us pray for all married couples, that their marriage may truly be a reflection of that sacrificial love of Christ for his Church, and the mutual respect that husbands and wives owe to one another.