

6th Sunday in Ordinary Time
February 13, 2011
Fr. Tom Elliott

The Sacrament of Marriage

Sirach 15:15-20
Psalm 119
1 Corinthians 2:6-10
Matthew 5:17-37

Last week, I preached on three particular Scripture passages that set the stage for us to better understand the two possible states in life—marriage and celibacy for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. This week, as we celebrate “World Marriage Day,” I want us to focus our attention more specifically on the Sacrament of Marriage. As with my sermon last week, I am going to be drawing heavily from the Theology of the Body, by Pope John Paul II.

If we had to summarize the whole Bible in just one word, we could legitimately use the word, “marriage.” From the very beginning of the Bible to its end, marriage is a consistent theme and topic. The first book, Genesis, begins with the two creation stories, describing the marital relationship of man and woman. The last book of the Bible, Revelation, is saturated in the language of marriage, describing the wedding feast of the Lamb of God¹ with the bride being the Church and the groom being Christ.² In between these two books, we find countless references to marriage, particularly in the Old Testament prophets as they describe God’s covenant with His people as a marriage. Why does the topic of marriage come up so frequently in the Bible? It’s because marriage is the “primordial sacrament.”

In numerous places in the Theology of the Body, Pope John Paul II calls marriage the “primordial sacrament.” What is a sacrament? A sacrament is a “visible sign of an invisible reality.” Therefore, the Pope is saying that the very first “visible sign” of God’s invisible presence and love (i.e. “image and likeness”) mentioned in the Bible is the description of the first human beings. In the first creation story we read—

Then God said: “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.... God created man in his image; in the divine image he created him; male and female he created them.

-Genesis 1:26a, 27

This passage very clearly states that the first human beings, precisely in their bodily existence, were “visible signs of an invisible reality.” And, even more profoundly, it is in the conjugal relationship of marriage that the man and the woman most reflected the *communal nature*, or likeness, of God.

While the fall of humanity—the breaking of the first covenant with God through sin—altered humanity’s experience of the sacramental nature of marriage, Christ has restored it. Saint Paul makes this very clear in his letter to the Ephesians. In chapter five of Saint Paul’s letter to the Ephesians we read about the restored sacramental nature of marriage.

¹ Revelation 19:7-8

² Revelation 19-22

Be subordinate to one another out of reverence for Christ. Wives should be subordinate to their husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is head of his wife just as Christ is head of the church, he himself the savior of the body. As the church is subordinate to Christ, so wives should be subordinate to their husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ loved the church and handed himself over for her to sanctify her, cleansing her by the bath of water with the word, that he might present to himself the church in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. So (also) husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one hates his own flesh but rather nourishes and cherishes it, even as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body. “For this reason a man shall leave (his) father and (his) mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” This is a great mystery, but I speak in reference to Christ and the church. In any case, each one of you should love his wife as himself, and the wife should respect her husband.

-Ephesians 5:21-33

These short verses are saturated in important implications for the Sacrament of Marriage, but I want to point out just a few that I feel are particularly significant. First, it’s imperative for us to realize that Paul is comparing two things in this passage. First, he is explaining how the marriage between a man and a wife should be like the relationship between Christ and the Church. This, of course, is the restoration of the sacramental nature of marriage—that through Christ, marriage is once again the visible sign of the invisible love of God (in Jesus Christ) for His Bride, the Church. Saint Paul also wants us to know that the love that Christ has for the Church has something to teach us about human marriage. These two relationships, then, shed light on one another in a reciprocal way.

The very first thing that Paul writes about this marital relationship is, “Be subordinate to one another out of reverence for Christ” (Ephesians 5:21). In this short sentence, Paul, using the language of his time, explains how a husband should be subordinate to his wife and a wife to her husband. At its very root, this subordination is a humble obedience, a placing oneself “beneath” the other, especially through *listening* to the other person. One of the greatest ways that married couples can love one another today is through listening. We live in a world right now where people are *starving* to have someone—anyone—listen to them (hence the popularity of things like Facebook and Twitter). The Sacrament of Marriage requires listening, humble subordination and obedience.

According to Saint Paul, the subordination that is required in the Sacrament of Marriage is intimately connected to Jesus Christ. In other words, married couples are not supposed to be subordinate to one another out of fear, force, timidity, or obligation, but rather, out of “reverence for Christ.” Saint Paul puts Christ as the *center* of the Sacrament of Marriage. This is a particularly important message—Paul is letting us know that the *highest value* in marriage—the *one thing* that a Christian must never compromise on during dating—is the centrality of Jesus Christ in the relationship. If one person in a relationship does not value or understand the centrality of Christ, then it will be impossible to explicitly “be subordinate to one another out of reverence for Christ” (Ephesians 5:21).

The centrality of Christ in a couple's relationship is made even more significant in the fact that Paul understands marriage to be a *process of salvation* for the couple. He described marital love as something that *saves* and *sanctifies*, as Christ's love for the Church does—

For the husband is head of his wife just as Christ is head of the church, he himself the *savior* of the body. As the church is subordinate to Christ, so wives should be subordinate to their husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ loved the church and handed himself over for her to *sanctify* her...

-Ephesians 5:25-26a (*emphasis mine*)

The Sacrament of Marriage not only reflects for the whole world the love of Christ for His Bride, the Church, but it is a means of salvation. Through a couple's marriage, they are to come to better understand and accept the salvation of Jesus Christ. In fact, Christ's love, sanctification, and salvation are supposed to be made tangible—that is, sacramental—through the love, care, acceptance, forgiveness, and compassion that husbands and wives show to one another!

At the end of Paul's passage on marriage, he quotes the second creation story from chapter two in the book of Genesis. By doing this, Paul does the same thing that Jesus did in the Gospel of Matthew chapter nineteen—he connects marriage very explicitly to “the beginning.” The difference, however, is that Paul uses the quote to refer specifically to how Christ, the Groom, has chosen and united Himself to the Bride, the Church. He calls this union a “great mystery,” that is, a sacrament.

There are many more things that can be pointed out in this passage from the letter to the Ephesians, however, for the sake of time, I'm going to stop here. This week, I encourage us to spend some time in prayer reflecting on chapter five in Ephesians. Below are some suggested meditations that are specific to each person's state in life.

SUGGESTED PRAYER EXERCISES:

✚ Slowly read through Ephesians 5:21-33.

- If you're single right now, but hope to get married one day, then I recommend asking the following questions during your meditation on this Scripture passage: “What type of spouse is Saint Paul describing in this passage and where would I mostly likely find such a person?”
- If you are married right now, I recommend the following questions for meditation on this Scripture passage: “In what ways do I currently ‘subordinate,’ or listen, to my spouse? In what ways do I experience the centrality of Christ in our marriage? In what ways can I work toward the sanctity and salvation of my spouse?”
- If you are consecrated to celibacy for the sake of the kingdom of heaven, then I recommend using the following questions for your meditation on the Ephesians passage: “What relationships in my life right now have ‘spousal’ qualities to them? What are the ways that I experience the spousal love of Christ in my life?”