

LOVE IN THE FAMILY – STRENGTH FOR THE CHURCH

1 – Introduction

Understanding the deep relationship between Church and Family, is of key importance for Catholics, as well as all Christians. Paul the Apostle seemed to be aware of this mysterious connection already within decades of the death and resurrection of Christ. Hence, he writes in his letter to the Ephesians: *This mystery has great significance, but I am applying it to Christ and the Church* (Eph 5,32). A family built upon the foundation of Christ himself becomes a church “in a nutshell” and the essential building block of the whole Church, when committed wholeheartedly to Christ.

The purpose of this catechesis is to awake the awareness of married couples, that their love for one another is in fact the realisation of Christ’s commandment and ultimate Christian goal, to “love as Christ”. “To love as Christ” means both answering the love of our eternal Father and giving our life for the good and salvation of others. The words of the Apostle to the Ephesians can be hard to understand, especially if we read them through the eyes of modernity. If we manage though, to read them as a revelation of the mystery, which was obviously the intention of Paul himself, our eyes can be opened to a deeper meaning of our own married life and our family life.



2 – Reading and understanding the Holy Scripture

A reading from the letter of St. Paul to the Ephesians (5,21-6,5).

5²¹ Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ. ²² Wives should be subject to their husbands as to the Lord, ²³ since, as Christ is head of the Church and saves the whole body, so is a husband the head of his wife; ²⁴ and as the Church is subject to Christ, so should wives be to their husbands, in everything. ²⁵ Husbands should love their wives, just as Christ loved the Church and sacrificed himself for her ²⁶ to make her holy by washing her in cleansing water with a form of words, ²⁷ so that when he took the Church to himself she would be glorious, with no speck or wrinkle or anything like that, but holy and faultless. ²⁸ In the same way, husbands must love their wives as they love their own bodies; for a man to love his wife is for him to love himself. ²⁹ A man never hates his own body, but he feeds it and looks after it; and that is the way Christ treats the Church, ³⁰ because we are parts of his Body. ³¹ This is why a man leaves his father and mother and becomes attached to his wife, and the two become one flesh. ³² This mystery has great significance, but I am applying it to Christ and the Church. ³³ To sum up: you also, each one of you, must love his wife as he loves himself; and let every wife respect her husband.

6¹ Children, be obedient to your parents in the Lord -- that is what uprightness demands. ² The first commandment that has a promise attached to it is: Honour your father and your mother, ³ and the promise is: so that you may have long life and prosper in the land. ⁴ And parents, never drive your children to resentment but bring them up with correction and advice inspired by the Lord.

2.1–Explanation



The letter to the Ephesians is divided into two main parts. The first three chapters essentially explains the idea of unity in Christ, in whom all things are brought together. The last three chapters explains the practical consequences of this teaching: unity in the Church, integrity of Christian life and unity in the Family. All these topics are of great importance, and especially the connection between them, when trying to understand Paul's teaching.

Verse 5,21: "Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ." In the beginning there is no differentiation between man and woman. The fundamental statement is a prolonging of that initial mystery, that everything is brought "together under Christ". This notion gives us a key to understanding Christian life in general, but especially the marital bond. Both are first and foremost subjects to Christ.

Verse 5,22: *“Wives should be subject to their husbands as to the Lord.”* The fundamental relationship of a Christian, is the relationship to our Lord, Jesus Christ. When finding love and planning marriage, we cannot leave out Christ. In fact, faith in Christ gives a different vitality to the commitment to the other person.

Verse 5,25: *“Husbands should love their wives, just as Christ loved the Church and sacrificed himself for her.”* Our relationship with Christ is not primarily a relationship from us to him. It’s the other way around. The underlying reality of that relationship is his sacrifice for us. Not only are we subjects to Him but being Christian is also to take upon ourselves his Cross, sacrificing ourselves for each other.

Verse 5,32: *“This mystery has great significance, but I am applying it to Christ and the Church.”* Referring to the marital bond, where husband and wife becomes “one flesh”, Paul does not hesitate to apply this to the relationship between Christ and the Church. This suggests that there is a strong correlation between the two types of relationship: the mystery of the Church becomes vivid within marital life.

Paul’s teaching on marital love is not bound by cultural or historical circumstances, as he speaks of a mystery that transcends all times and cultures. This mystery is Christ himself and his eternal love and applies both to the Church and to the marriage between a man and a woman.

2.2–Summary and practice

Every married couple is called to the mystery of becoming “one flesh” and to unity in Christ. Both husband and wife are subject to Christ himself, and are to express this through their marital life. The essential message is: Husband, love your wife! Wife, respect your husband! Even though Paul uses different words, the meaning is the same: Love one another as Christ loves you.

The practical meaning of this teaching is to be Christ-like in married life. Some essential deeds of married life emerging from this, Paul brilliantly describes in the letter to the Corinthians: patience, kindness, trust, gentleness, joyfulness, truthfulness, forgiveness, hopefulness, endurance.

Marriage does not erase flaws, weaknesses or sin, but it is a great way to grow in Christ, and this is where the strength of the Church is found – in growing with Christ.



3 – Theological and Spiritual Teaching

The Church has since the beginning been aware of the special graces that is given to married couples, as they take upon themselves the mission of Christ towards each other and growing together in Christ, not merely “in flesh”, but in the unity of the Holy Spirit. In fact, the shared love, which has its ultimate source in God’s love revealed to mankind on the cross, belongs to the special grace and special gifts they receive within the People of God.



“The grace proper to the sacrament of Matrimony is intended to perfect the couple’s love and to strengthen their indissoluble unity” (Catechism, 1641). When properly received and practised, according to the teaching of the Church this grace even enables married couples to foretaste the heavenly wedding feast of the Lamb.

The special link between marriage and the Church is also stated the following way by the Magisterium of the Church: “The deepest reason is found in the fidelity of God to his covenant, in that of Christ to his Church. Through the sacrament of Matrimony, the spouses are enabled to represent this fidelity and witness to it” (Catechism, 1647). The fidelity of conjugal love is a representation of God’s own faithfulness towards us.

4 – Reading and meditation

By virtue of the sacramentality of their marriage, spouses are bound to one another in the most profoundly indissoluble manner. Their belonging to each other is the real representation, by means of the sacramental sign, of the very relationship of Christ with the Church.

Spouses are therefore the permanent reminder to the Church of what happened on the Cross; they are for one another and for the children witnesses to the salvation in which the sacrament makes them sharers. Of this salvation event marriage, like every sacrament, is a memorial, actuation and prophecy: “As a memorial, the sacrament gives them the grace and duty of commemorating the great works of God and of bearing witness to them before their children. As actuation, it gives them the grace and duty of putting into practice in the present, towards each other and their children, the demands of a love which forgives and redeems. As prophecy, it gives them the grace and duty of living and bearing witness to the hope of the future encounter with Christ.” (Familiaris Consortio, 13)

The three aspects of the sacrament; memorial, actuation and prophecy, exposes the role of marriage and family life as a strength for the Church.

1. How is our marital life a commemoration of God’s great works?
2. How are we practising forgiveness?
3. How is our marital life inviting others to encounter Christ?

