

Twenty-first Sunday of Ordinary Time

Our reflections focus on the Second Reading of the Mass. In the verses just prior to today's reading, Paul expresses his desire that the Christian community in Ephesus be 'filled with the Holy Spirit' (Ephesians 5:18), and he speaks of what this should mean for community celebration of the Eucharist, which, as you probably realise, was in his day celebrated in a home. Gathered to celebrate the Eucharist, we are to 'give way to one another in obedience to Christ'. If we really are filled with the Holy Spirit we will be like Jesus 'gentle and humble of heart' (Matthew 11:29). Like him we will look up to others with reverence, we will recognise how sacred each person is to God and always treat each and every person with respect. Jesus went so far as to give his life for others. As his disciples we are not to seek our own interest, our own life. If we do that we will end up losing everything. We are to 'give way to one another' after the example of Jesus.

In the context of the home, Paul uses the imagery of married love to speak of the relationship between the risen Jesus, seen as the bridegroom, and the community, seen as his bride. We are familiar with this imagery from the Gospels (see Mark 2:19; John 2:1-11; 3:28-30). Paul refers back to the story found in the book of Genesis. In reaction against the male dominance that was typical of the ancient societies of the Middle East, the author of Genesis insists on the dignity of woman. She was not created after man, but in the very same act of creation. In this ancient Hebrew version of a Semitic myth, God created 'Adam' - that is to say 'the human being' - but it is only when God separates out the 'rib' and forms it into woman that a female exist, and it is only then with the 'rib' removed, that we have a male - each incomplete and needing each other to be whole.

In today's reading Paul compares Christ to Adam (in Genesis understood as 'humanity', but then as the first male) and the Church to Eve. Christ, the bridegroom of the Church, continually offers his love to the Church, his bride. Paul tells us that 'Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her' (5:25). He did this 'that he might sanctify her' (5:26). In other words, Jesus gave himself to us in love in order to draw us into his heart to share with us the intimacy of his communion with God. One of the pre-nuptial ceremonies at Paul's time was the bride's ritual bathing. Paul speaks of Baptism as Christ cleansing his bride the Church 'by the washing of water with the word' (5:26). In Paul's day, the woman's primary role was in the home. It was the husband's role to work to ensure that his wife and children were properly nourished and cared for. So, in today's reading, Paul speaks of Christ who 'nourishes and cherishes' the church (5:29-30). In Paul's day, the husband was considered the head of the family. So Paul speaks of Christ as the 'head of the church, his body' (5:23). We, the Christian community, as the Bride of Christ, owe him our obedience, for he is our Lord.

The fact that the love of Christ for the Church can be spoken of as the love of a bridegroom for a bride has implications for every relationship between Christians. We all belong to the Church. We are all part of the 'Bride' who is cherished by Christ. Should we not then cherish one another as sacred and 'give way to one another in obedience to Christ'?

In today's reading Paul focuses on what this should mean for Christian spouses. Naturally, when Paul speaks of marriage he is speaking of the institution as he found it in the Jewish and Greco-Roman world of his day. In those cultures and at that time a husband was considered to have

authority over his wife, and she was legally subject to him. This is not the case in our culture and we do violence to Paul's intention if we quote him as intending to set in concrete the model of marriage that pertained in his own day. Instead, what we should be looking for in his words is the revolutionary dimension he introduces by seeing marriage itself in the light of the kind of divine love that Jesus revealed.

Paul's key point is that a husband and a wife are to relate to each other in the way that Jesus relates to them. He takes it for granted that a wife will be subject to her husband, for he knew no other model. But the way in which she is to be subject is quite revolutionary. She is to be subject *as the Church is subject to Christ*. Here we have a special freedom, and reverence, and prayer, and spontaneous joy. He takes it for granted that a husband will exercise authority over his wife for he knew no other model. But the way in which he is to do this is quite revolutionary. He is asking the husband to exercise his authority *as Christ exercises his authority over the Church* - that is, with the fidelity, the generosity and the gentleness of Jesus. It is an authority of love, of self-sacrifice, of a life given that his wife may enjoy the freedom she has as a disciple of Jesus.

By introducing into marriage this profound principle of self-sacrificing Christ-love, Jesus has profoundly affected the institution of marriage itself. The more mature model of marriage which we experience today is itself a fruit of this Christian reflection, in spite of the fact that many churchmen have been and continue to be at the forefront of reaction against change. The religious leaders of Jesus' day were not known for their openness.

In our culture it is no longer assumed that the husband has authority over his wife. A man and a woman commit themselves together in love and as equals to a partnership in which they attempt to reach decisions in mutual respect and love. When there is disagreement it is not at all assumed that the wife must submit to her husband's will. A way has to be found to live in unity, and compromises are found to be necessary. When consensus cannot be reached, sometimes one submits, sometimes the other. In such a situation it is no longer satisfactory to apply the principle in the way Paul does. It is no longer satisfactory to compare the husband to Christ and the wife to the Church. The husband, as Saint Paul says, is to be Christ for his wife. If Paul was writing today, he would add that the wife is to be Christ for her husband. Both belong to the community that is loved by Christ, and one complements the other in the Church in which Jesus' Spirit dwells.

Paul knew, as we know, that not every marriage is made in heaven and that there are times when the harm that comes from a mistaken and destructive commitment has to be stopped. He knew, as we know, that it is not easy, even in the best of marriages, for a man and a woman to learn the unselfishness without which their marriage cannot survive as a love-union. And so he reminds those of us who are husbands that when we love our wives, Christ is loving them through us. The husband is a sacrament to her, making effective Christ's love through the signs that he gives her of his love. When you who are a wife love your husband, Christ is loving him through you. You are a sacrament to him, making effective Christ's love through the signs that you give him of your love. When you who are a husband truly listen to your wife, and sensitively follow the wisdom of her words, you are obeying Christ; and when you who are a wife truly listen to your husband and sensitively follow the wisdom of his words, you are obeying Christ.

When you love each other, your love is graced, and you can call upon this grace to grow in love till you love each other with the love of the Heart of Christ. This will mean a deeper sense of the sacred in your mutual love. It will mean a clearer and purer love. It will mean that you will grow to experience the same compassion for each other that burns in the Heart of Jesus. You will also learn to forgive each other as Jesus forgives you, and you will experience that special peace that flows from fidelity.

Wives, when your husband is grateful to you, know that he is a sacrament to you, expressing the gratitude of Jesus to you. Likewise, husbands be comforted in the knowledge that when your wife thanks you, Christ is thanking you through her. The sacrament of marriage means that every time you console, or sensitively challenge and correct each other, Christ is mediating through you, as sacraments of his presence, his consolation and correction. Know, too, that the love you have committed to each other is also a sacrament for the rest of the community, witnessing to the unconditional and faithful love which Christ has for us all. This is why marriage is celebrated publicly within the Christian community. You are a precious sign to us of the fidelity to us of the love of Christ the Bridegroom of the Church.

This, as you know, is especially so for any children with whom God may grace you. It is your mutual sacramental love that is the garden in which these little ones will first experience love and learn to love in their turn. But your consecrated love goes beyond your own family. The grace given you overflows into the whole of the Christian family which you help in a special way to become a home and to grow, like your own home, into an environment of love where we can all, especially the lonely, experience the gentleness and the welcome of the heart of Jesus for us.

I am aware that, like Paul in today's Reading, I have been reflecting on the union of woman and man. As disciples of Jesus and 'out of reverence for Christ'(Ephesians 5:21), we should also do all we can to support in love the union entered into by homosexual couples. It is different from the union that traditionally we have called 'marriage', but no less sacred to them. We should welcome the gift their commitment is to each other and to the community, a commitment that needs the protection of law and the respect of the community.