

This Great Mystery

Session 9. This Great Mystery

The secret God kept for ages turned out to be a wedding, and you are inside it.

What We Found

We found that verse 21, 'be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ,' governs the whole passage. It flows out of the Spirit-filled life Paul described just before it, and the instruction to wives cannot even be read apart from it. Mutual deference out of reverence for Christ is the ordinary posture of every Christian, married or not.

We weighed the passage and found the weight lands on the husband: his charge is to love as Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her. The only headship this passage describes is crucifixion-shaped, giving, washing, nourishing, cherishing, and it never once authorizes control. A husband using this chapter as a weapon is contradicting the only instructions it gives him.

We opened the envelope. Eight weeks of guesses met Paul's own answer: the mystery is Christ and the Church. All along it has been union, God joining what was separated, and its deepest image is a marriage. Paul reached back to the first wedding in Eden, the bride built from the side of the sleeping man, and told us it was always about Christ and his bride. Every marriage since Eden is the image; the union of Christ and the Church is the original.

And we found what that makes of the Church: not an institution we assess from the outside, but the bride Christ died for, still being washed, still being loved into splendor. We are members of his body. The mystery is not something we finally understood tonight so much as something we discovered we live inside.

Voices of the Church

St. John Chrysostom, d. 407

Preaching on this very passage, Chrysostom turns to the husbands and, in substance, tells them: you have heard the measure asked of your wife; now hear the measure asked of you. Love her as Christ loved the Church, which means: even if you must lay down your life for her, do not refuse. Christ won a bride who had turned her back on him, and he won her not with threats or fear but by giving himself. A household governed by fear is not a Christian household; a wife is not a servant but your own body, and no one ever hated his own flesh.

Homilies on Ephesians, Homily 20. Summary of St. John Chrysostom's teaching, not a direct quotation.

For the group. This lands hardest on anyone tempted to hear the passage as a license: the Church's greatest preacher read it, sixteen centuries ago, as a demand for the husband's death to self.

St. Augustine of Hippo, d. 430

Augustine teaches that as Eve was drawn from the side of Adam while he slept, so the Church is born from the side of Christ as he slept the sleep of death on the cross. When the soldier's lance opened his side and blood and water flowed out, Augustine sees the sacraments by which the Church lives flowing from her Bridegroom's opened heart. The first wedding in Eden was a prophecy acted out in flesh: the new Adam sleeps, and from his wounded side God builds the new Eve.

Tractates on the Gospel of John, in substance. Summary of St. Augustine of Hippo's teaching, not a direct quotation.

For the group. For a group that has just read Genesis 2 with their own eyes, this voice confirms what several of them will already be half-seeing, and it turns the crucifix on the wall into a wedding portrait.

St. John Paul II, d. 2005

St. John Paul II reads this passage with verse 21 as its governing key. The subjection Paul describes, he teaches in substance, is mutual: a reciprocal self-gift lived out of reverence for Christ, and this mutual subjection is an innovation of the Gospel, something the ancient world did not have. The husband's headship is real only as self-gift, modeled on the Christ who gave himself up, and it excludes every kind of domination by which the wife would become a servant of her husband. Wherever this text has been used to justify control, it has been used against its own words.

Mulieris Dignitatem 24. Summary of St. John Paul II's teaching, not a direct quotation.

For the group. This gives the group the Church's own modern reading, from a canonized pope, and closes the door on the fear that Catholicism quietly wants the abusive reading to be true.

Live It This Week

Practices

1. Once this week, read Ephesians 5:25-27 slowly and put your own name where the Church is: Christ loved *me* and gave himself up for *me*, to sanctify *me*, to present *me* in splendor. Sit with it for five unhurried minutes.
2. Practice verse 21 in secret: pick one person you find genuinely hard to defer to, and do one deliberate, unannounced act of service for them before we meet again. Tell no one.
3. At Mass this Sunday, as you walk up to receive Communion, remember verse 30: we are members of his body. Receive as the bride receiving the Bridegroom who gave himself up for her.
4. If you are married or seriously dating: have one honest conversation this week about what 'gave himself up for her' would concretely look like in your relationship this month. If you are single: pray for one married couple you know, by name, every day this week.

Scripture Memory

Ephesians 5:32

"This mystery is a profound one, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church."

Ephesians 5:32

Go Further in the Catechism

- CCC 766. the Church born from the opened side of Christ
- CCC 796. Christ and the Church as Bridegroom and bride
- CCC 1616. Paul reads marriage in light of Christ's spousal love
- CCC 1617. baptism the nuptial bath; marriage of the baptized a true sacrament

Before next session. Read Ephesians 6:1-9 before we meet again.