

SYMPOSIUM: A CELEBRATION OF THE TWENTIETH ANNIVERSARY OF MULIERIS DIGNITATEM, PART II: ARTICLE: A COMMENTARY ON EPHESIANS 5 AND HEADSHIP

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Reporter

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Text

[*393]

Introduction

In Ephesians 5, we encounter the celebrated analogy of the love between Christ and the Church and the love between husband and wife. Seen in the light of Christ, the ontological ordering of man and woman "from the beginning" bears within it an ethical obligation: man and woman are called to give of themselves. ¹ Thus, the author of Ephesians 5 pronounces these commands:

Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ. Wives, be subject to your husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. As the church is subject to Christ, so let wives also be subject in everything to their husbands. Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. Even so husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no man ever hates his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body. "For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one." This is a great mystery, and I mean in reference to Christ and the church; however, let each one **[*394]** of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband. ²

For a theologian, Ephesians 5 is a scintillating passage. It suggests that the most common and mundane realities - the love of man and woman, sex, and childbearing - are of themselves open to the life of grace; that what seems almost instinctual - the drive of romantic love - reveals its highest meaning in a profound mystical union: the love of

¹ Pope John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body* 25-29, 45-48 (1997) [hereinafter *Theology of the Body*] (connecting Christ's reference to "the beginning" in Matthew 19:8 to the creation accounts in Genesis 1-2 and arguing that Genesis suggests that man and woman come to be more perfect images of God through interpersonal communion).

² Ephesians 5:21-33 (Revised Standard, Catholic Edition).

Christ for the Church and the union of God and man in the Eucharist. Not surprisingly, Ephesians 5 stands as one of the decisive texts for the theological works of Pope John Paul II, especially his celebrated *Theology of the Body*.³

And yet, Ephesians 5 is at the same time one of the most troubling passages for theologians and pastors alike, because it contains the famously one-sided command that a wife "be subject" to her husband, who she is to consider her "head."⁴ In *Mulieris Dignitatem*, Pope John Paul II stops just short of apologizing for the command to wives that is "so profoundly rooted in the customs and religious tradition of the time."⁵ He contrasts the "old" teaching of wifely subjection with the innovations of the Gospel message. As an example, he cites the revolutionary teaching of Galatians 3:28 rejecting the distinctions between man and woman, slave and master.⁶ Nevertheless, Pope John Paul II never rejects the teaching of the subjection of the wife to the husband, but exhorts us to interpret it in context: "The challenge presented by the 'ethos' of the Redemption is clear and definitive. All the reasons in favor of the 'subjection' of woman to man in marriage must be understood in the sense of a 'mutual subjection' of both 'out of reverence for Christ.'"⁷ In the end, Pope John Paul II clears the way for a new approach to the question of the subjection of the wife to the husband within the context of marriage as a "mutual subjection," a shared vocation of love.⁸

[*395] This Article considers the following questions: What could the submission of the wife mean when we interpret it within the context of the reciprocal and mutual communion of love and life that marriage is intended to be? What function could this submission have within marriage? And finally, what meaning could it possibly have in our modern context?

Part I of this Article discusses some very obvious observations about maleness and femaleness drawn from personal experiences as a wife, mother, and farmer. This is in no way to trumpet the priority of experience, but on the contrary, to ground these reflections in the ordinary expressions of gender in the created order. This reflection naturally brings us to the findings of biology, sociology, and anthropology. Part II of this Article draws out these reflections on creation by meditating on the meaning of the mutual relation of man and woman as an image of Trinitarian communion, that is, within the context of John Paul II's "theological anthropology." Part III of this Article considers the vocation of the woman and the possible anthropological significance of the woman's subjection. Finally, the conclusion tentatively considers the impact of wifely "submission" in our current situation.

I. Male and Female

When looking squarely at maleness and femaleness, as presented in the created order, we are struck first of all by difference. This difference is clear in the animal world. For instance, in the raising of dairy goats, every female is a prize. Females bear the kids and produce milk. In this world, males are essentially used as studs. A male is really only valuable if his mother or sisters are prize milkers. Any male that does not have an excellent female pedigree will not be kept for breeding. Males will be euthanized at birth, raised for meat, or saved as pets.

This is because in the animal kingdom, it is all about procreation. The female of the species is the "place" where procreation happens. Males generally have greater size and more impressive horns or tusks. But most of this is there for the sake of alluring or defending the females so that the females can have more babies and the species

³ See *Theology of the Body*, supra note 1, at 304-44.

⁴ Ephesians 5:22-23 (Revised Standard, Catholic Edition).

⁵ Pope John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem* [Apostolic Letter on the Dignity and Vocation of Women] P 24 (1988) [hereinafter *Mulieris Dignitatem*].

⁶ Id. P 11; Galatians 3:28 (Revised Standard, Catholic Edition) ("There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.").

⁷ *Mulieris Dignitatem*, supra note 5, P 24.

⁸ See id.; Ephesians 5:21 (Revised Standard, Catholic Edition) (emphasis added).

can continue. As Walter Ong points out in *Fighting for Life*, males are [*396] expendable in a way that females are not.⁹ Within a species, males will battle each other for territory. These battles are not usually to the death, but are ritualized and ceremonial. Nevertheless, there is conflict. These are the battles in which the male sharpens his sword, so to speak.

Similarly in humans, the psychology of sexual development teaches that male-against-male conflict - often through games or sports - characterizes the arduous process of becoming a man. A boy has to separate from his mother through interactions with other men, most importantly his father, in order to experience his own masculinity. Even Jesus ran off as a twelve-year-old boy, separating himself from his mother - and he went to his Father's house.¹⁰

For a man to become a man, there are necessary and necessarily stressful experiences of going out, of leaving, of separating, that are not paralleled in the woman's experience. A girl matures by discovering what is within her.¹¹ The womb is the center, and "becoming a woman" is a matter of realizing this and drawing one's creative power from it, whether or not a woman ever becomes a physical mother.

A 2006 study by Jonathan Gottschall, a "literary Darwinist," bears out the universality of the male-female difference.¹² In his research into the themes of ninety folktale collections, Gottschall discovers amazing consistencies in the human narratives that recall and reflect the differences between men and women. His team "found overwhelmingly similar gender depictions emphasizing strong male protagonists and female beauty."¹³ "The study sample had three times as many male as compared with female main characters and six times as many references to female beauty as to male beauty."¹⁴ The man is the one going out who must prove himself through conflict with the world and other men. By contrast, the woman is noted for her beauty. Beauty is above all the desirability of the one who receives [*397] love, whose power is proven not in going out, but shines forth from within.

II. Image of the Trinity

As Pope John Paul II shows in his *Theology of the Body*, the sexual difference that is evident in the created order takes on a deeper significance in the light of the revelation of Christ. In Genesis, man and woman are created "for" each other.¹⁵ This being-for-the-other is expressed in and through the human body as male and female, made for union with each other. At the same time, the union of man and woman points beyond itself to the gratuity of a Creator-God who is in himself eternal self-giving love.¹⁶ As Pope John Paul II writes:

⁹ Walter J. Ong, *Fighting for Life: Contest, Sexuality, and Consciousness* 52-56 (1981).

¹⁰ Luke 2:41-51.

¹¹ In a profound sense, by contrast to man, woman is interiority, self-possession. She relates to herself interiorly, and others relate to her interiorly - her lovers, her children." Ong, *supra* note 9, at 90.

¹² Jeremy Hsu, *The Secrets of Storytelling: Why We Love a Good Yarn*, in *Sci. Am. Mind*, Aug./Sept. 2008, at 45, 50.

¹³ *Id.*

¹⁴ *Id.*

¹⁵ See Genesis 1:27, 2:18-25; *Theology of the Body*, *supra* note 1, at 42-48.

¹⁶ Pope John Paul II states:

The body which expresses femininity manifests the reciprocity and communion of persons. It expresses it by means of the gift as the fundamental characteristic of personal existence. This is the body - a witness to creation as a fundamental gift, and so a witness to Love as the source from which this same giving springs. Masculinity and femininity - namely, sex - is the original sign of a creative donation and an awareness on the part of man, male-female, of a gift lived in an original way. Such is the meaning with which sex enters the theology of the body.

Theology of the Body, *supra* note 1, at 61-62.

In the light of the New Testament it is possible to discern how the primordial model of the family is to be sought in God himself, in the Trinitarian mystery of his life. The divine "We" is the eternal pattern of the human "we", especially of that "we" formed by the man and the woman created in the divine image and likeness.¹⁷

In the mutual relation of husband and wife, man and woman together image God as Trinitarian communion.

This "imaging" of the Trinitarian communion in the relation of man and woman is more than mere likeness, a simple reflection. It is rather through their conscious living of the body as a gift that man and woman become more perfectly the image of God. As Pope John Paul II repeatedly emphasizes, communion with others is "also a call and a task."¹⁸ "To say that man is created in the image and likeness of **[*398]** God means that man is called to exist 'for' others, to become a gift."¹⁹ Pope John Paul II states:

The whole of human history unfolds within the context of this call. In this history, on the basis of the principle of mutually being "for" the other, in interpersonal "communion," there develops in humanity itself, in accordance with God's will, the integration of what is "masculine" and what is "feminine."²⁰

With this in mind, let us turn to the mystery of the Trinity, the primordial image of the family, with our particular concern - the question of the "submission" of the wife. Through the notion of submission, an inequality seems to be introduced to the relation of two equals. Is there any possibility of such inequality in the Trinity? If so, what light can it shed on the relation of man and woman?²¹ In the Trinity, the Father, Son, and Spirit are united in eternal relation. Each is distinct, and yet each is wholly God. Yet, the relations between the Trinitarian Persons are different. The Father is eternally begetting the Son, and the Father and the Son are eternally breathing forth the Spirit.²² Since this "begetting" and "breathing forth" cannot diminish the Persons, we find ourselves before a paradox: the more each person in the Trinity "gives" of himself - begetting or breathing forth - the more each becomes himself. The Father is precisely a "father" in his eternal "begetting" of the Son. He never "gives himself away." The Father and the Son are precisely themselves in breathing forth of the Spirit. Likewise, the Son's relation to the Father is that of eternally receiving his being from the Father - eternally being-begotten. What the Son "gives" to the Father is his eternal "receptivity," his "being-begotten." Remember that there never was a time when the Son was "not."²³ The paradox is that the Holy Spirit, who is apparently eternally "on the receiving end," is, taking the **[*399]** liberty of being poetic, the very picture of eternal preciousness - he is the Person Who is Gift, the "Person-Gift."²⁴

If we accept the "logic" of the Trinity, we can better understand the mutuality of the man and woman who submit to each other "for Christ."²⁵ This mutuality does not flatten the distinctions between man and woman. Rather, through their mutual self-gift to each other, each receives himself or herself. A man becomes more a man in his gift to his wife. A woman becomes more a woman in her self-gift to her husband. This paradox is beautifully expressed in

¹⁷ Pope John Paul II, *Gratissimam Sane* [Letter to Families] P 6 (1994), in 23 *Origins* 637, 641 (1994).

¹⁸ *Mulieris Dignitatem*, supra note 5, P 7.

¹⁹ *Id.*

²⁰ *Id.*

²¹ My reflections on the Trinity are drawn mainly from 4 Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory* 70-84 (Graham Harrison trans., Ignatius Press 1994) (1980). It is important to understand that Balthasar sees the possibility of discussing an eternal event in God (like begetting or being-begotten) only by way of analogy. Strictly speaking there is no creaturely "becoming" or "change" in God. See *id.* at 58-59, 67, 74.

²² *Catechism of the Catholic Church* PP 240, 246, 254 (2d ed. 1997).

²³ *Id.* P 240.

²⁴ Pope John Paul II, *Dominum et Vivificantem* [Encyclical Letter on the Holy Spirit in the Life of the Church and the World] P 10 (1986).

²⁵ Ephesians 5:21-33.

Mulieris Dignitatem, where Pope John Paul II describes the man as the one who "loves" and the woman as the one who "receives love."²⁶ A man's love enables a woman to be fully herself. "In this love there is a fundamental affirmation of the woman as a person. This affirmation makes it possible for the female personality to develop fully and be enriched."²⁷

Precisely in giving himself to his wife, a husband becomes more of a man. Responding to St. Paul's command to love his wife "as Christ loves the Church" means that the man is called into an intimate relationship with the woman - called to nourish and cherish her as his own body.²⁸ Further, he must embrace her child, who comes from her body, as his own. As Pope John Paul II notes, "In many ways he has to learn his own 'fatherhood' from the mother."²⁹ In this beautiful passage, Pope John Paul II summarizes the truth of mutual self-gift: the husband gives himself to his wife and "receives" himself back from her as father.

As Karol Wojtyla illustrates in his play *The Radiation of Fatherhood*, becoming a father is a highly stressful experience for a man. In this play, Adam struggles to become a father to his adopted daughter Monica. Wojtyla takes this experience of adoption as a paradigm for natural, biological fatherhood. The father is always essentially outside the child, even the child he himself has begotten, and struggles to understand the child from within in order to "give [*400] birth through choice."³⁰ In the end - and this is the challenge to every man - Adam can only become a father by rejecting "loneliness" - his independence, his detachment - a task he clearly sees as requiring a death of self.³¹ Thus, Adam's existential struggle to go out of himself, to really accept and love his daughter, reveals a deeper drama. Adam is wrestling with his idea of who God is and what it means to image the God who is Father. Wojtyla suggests that the only way Adam can attain to the image of God imprinted on his soul is through an imitation of "the Bridegroom's death."³² Only through self-gift in the image of Christ can Adam become a true image of God, which is at the same time to be a true father.

III. The Woman's Gift

If fatherhood can only be attained through this sort of death to self, then what can be said of true motherhood? As already mentioned, from the standpoint of biology and psychology, a girl has an easier time discovering her femininity than a man has in discovering his masculinity. This advantage is only intensified in the spousal relationship. Because the child develops on the inside of the woman, the woman is always more "on the inside" of everything that has to do with the family - conception, growth, nurturing, and education. A young mother, anxious though she may be, has abundant maternal instincts and sensibilities to enable her to care for her child.

Because of her unique relation to the child, a woman has a pivotal role in the development of a child's sense of self. This unique relationship begins in utero and continues after birth.³³ In his *Letter to Women*, Pope John Paul II calls the woman "God's own smile upon the newborn child."³⁴ Through her smile, the mother is the first person to

²⁶ *Mulieris Dignitatem*, supra note 5, P 29 ("When the author of the *Letter to the Ephesians* calls Christ 'the Bridegroom' and the Church 'the Bride,' he indirectly confirms through this analogy the truth about woman as bride. The Bridegroom is the one who loves. The Bride is loved: it is she who receives love, in order to love in return.").

²⁷ *Id.* P 24.

²⁸ See *Ephesians* 5:28-29; cf. *Genesis* 2:21-25.

²⁹ *Mulieris Dignitatem*, supra note 5, P 18.

³⁰ Karol Wojtyla, *Radiation of Fatherhood*, pt. II, no. 4, in *The Collected Plays and Writings on Theater* 323, 354 (Boleslaw Taborski trans., 1987). "Love is always a choice and is always born by choice." *Id.* pt. II, no. 4, at 355.

³¹ *Id.* pt. I, no. 4, at 339 ("On the borderline of loneliness, love must become suffering: Your Son has suffered.").

³² *Id.* pt. III, no. 2, at 363.

³³ *Mulieris Dignitatem*, supra note 5, P 18.

³⁴ Pope John Paul II, *Letter to Women* P 2 (1995), reprinted in *Pope John Paul II on the Genius of Women* 45, 46 (Comm. on Women in Soc'y & in the Church, U.S. Catholic Conference ed., 1997) [hereinafter *Letter to Women*].

reveal to the child the truth of his existence: you are wanted, you are loved. Through all the discreet acts of motherhood - the mother's touch, her looks, her voice, and the very gift of her body as [*401] food for the child - the mother testifies to this truth. And this is the firm basis for the child's sense of himself as good, as a gift.³⁵ This self-gift on the part of the woman is anything but passive. Rather, "motherhood in its personal-ethical sense expresses a very important creativity on the part of the woman, upon whom the very humanity of the new human being mainly depends."³⁶

The centrality of the mother in the child's life is precisely the key to understanding the meaning of a wife's "submission." For as central as the mother is to the child, there comes a time early in the child's life when the child begins to open to the outside world. The child encounters a first significant "other" - the child's father. The father is different from the mother because he is outside of the world of mother and child. In the father, the child encounters God as transcendent, but only if the mother allows it.

A father must, in an important respect, "learn" his fatherhood from the mother.³⁷ And yet, at the same time, he must truly image God who is Father. This is only possible through the "submission" of his wife. She permits her husband to enter her world - the intimate world of mother and child. A mother surrenders to this reality because she wants the child to develop in love and because she acknowledges the man's difficult but critical role. She desires to build up the communion of the family and, of course, to foster the relationship between the child and God.³⁸ In this sense, a woman can even find a clear way to accepting the "hard" saying of First Corinthians 11:7: "For a man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God; but woman is the glory of man."³⁹ Indeed, there is a real way in which the man, as Father, in the image of the Bridegroom, must become the image of God.

Understood in this way - that is, as an expression of genuine feminine self-gift to the child and to her husband, who can only attain to fatherhood through her initiative - the subjection of the wife to the husband enables a woman to attain the fullness of her womanhood. "The moral and spiritual strength of a woman is joined to her awareness that God entrusts the human being to her in a special [*402] way."⁴⁰ Is it not the case that a husband is entrusted to a wife and that she bears a unique responsibility to draw him into the communio? And, in doing so, is it not possible that she experiences her own womanly power more? In the awareness of the other and in the moment of this surrender that she alone can give, a woman becomes more profoundly who she is.⁴¹

Conclusion

The experience of women in modernity has demonstrated that women can do just about everything, and at once: we can mother our children, maintain our homes, and shine in the world of men. But, what this Article proposes is that buying wholeheartedly into this modern ideal is precisely the feminine temptation. Certainly, we are all too familiar with the temptation of the man that is exemplified in the epidemic of dead-beat fathers: the man, who is called to go out, chooses to "go it alone," to escape responsibility, to avoid the painful work of relating to the woman and the child. And yet we rarely attend to the opposite temptation: that of the woman. She is tempted to do it all herself, to take all the responsibility, precisely because, as a woman, she can. But we must admit, this is no more a

³⁵ See *Mulieris Dignitatem*, supra note 5, P 29 (discussing the ontological need of the person to be loved and the woman's role in this regard).

³⁶ *Id.* P 19.

³⁷ *Id.* P 18.

³⁸ The psychologically sound woman knows how to relinquish, to let her natural protectiveness open into freedom for those she protects." Ong, supra note 9, at 100.

³⁹ 1 Corinthians 11:7 (Revised Standard, Catholic Edition).

⁴⁰ *Mulieris Dignitatem*, supra note 5, P 30; see also *Letter to Women*, supra note 34, P 12.

⁴¹ See Gertrud von le Fort, *The Eternal Woman: The Woman in Time, Timeless Woman* 73 (Marie Cecilia Buehrle trans., Bruce Publ'g Co. 1962) (1954).

mutual relation than the situation where the man checks out. Nor is it a mutual relation in which the woman endeavors to do it all and then ropes the man in as an accomplice to her plans.

"Headship" for a woman is not simply about letting a man earn all the money, make all the decisions, or initiate sexual intercourse every time. And yet the drama of sin can play itself out in all of these areas. In every marriage the woman can see before her the temptation to grasp everything for herself. Like Eve in the Garden of Eden, she is the one first tempted to "become like gods," not because she is weak, but because she is the powerful one.⁴² And it is in the act of [*403] submission, of "letting it be," that she realizes something of the image of God in her.

It is hardly in vogue these days to advocate for the "submission" of the woman. Indeed, as noted at the outset, even Pope John Paul II avoided this advocacy. And yet there are whispers of a cultural shift - not the reemergence of a repressive patriarchy, but the return of a wisdom that is born of a deeply Christian sense of the mutuality, equality, and difference that coexist in genuine spousal love.⁴³ Perhaps the best that can be hoped for in a new appreciation of "wifely submission" is the return of a robust fatherhood modeled on that of God the Father, whose love is radiated in the world through the self-giving love of the Bridegroom, Jesus Christ.

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⁴² Id. at 8. Elaborating further, Gertrud von le Fort states:

The Bible story shows clearly that she was the stronger and had the ascendancy over man. Man, regarded in his cosmic aspect, stands in the foreground of strength, while woman dwells in its deeper reaches. Whenever woman has been suppressed, it was never because she was weak, but because she was recognized and feared as having power, and with reason; for at the moment when the stronger power no longer desires surrender but seeks self-glorification, a catastrophe is bound to ensue.

Id. at 8-9.

⁴³ For a spirited defense of the woman's sexual role in marriage, see Caitlin Flanagan, *To Hell with All That: Loving and Loathing Our Inner Housewife* 23-43 (2006).