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“Genuine submission”

Eph 5:21-33

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 flesh.” This mystery is a profound one, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church; however, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband.

Anyone who has a living relationship with the Lord will not see this passage from Ephesians as discriminating against women, even though it is easily understood in that way today. In fact, such an interpretation comes from the spirit of the world and not from the Spirit of the Lord. We need to reflect calmly on what submission to Christ really means, to realise that it is not simply the mentality of a particular age, but an attitude that is always valid.

Indeed, the relationship between the Lord and His Church is a true relationship of love. If we look, for example, at the relationship between Jesus and His disciples, we see that it is never a competition for power, but one of service (cf. Mt 20:25-28) It is not for nothing that the Lord washes the feet of the Apostles (cf. Jn 13:5), showing them what true greatness is in the eyes of God and what true authority is. It is God Himself who shows us by His own example!

When we look at our own relationship with the Lord, once we have been set free by Him from false concepts and fears, we can see that He never behaves in an authoritarian way towards us. We know very well that God always wants the best for us and never forces us.

The One who would really have the right to command us and demand of us unconditionally what is right in His eyes, humbly knocks at our door, inviting us and asking us to follow the path that leads us to the full truth.

Then we see that God's authority - which is absolute - is made effective in love and service to humanity. Therefore, our submission to Him must also be (or at least should be, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit) moved by love for Him, in the grateful joy of being able to know and serve God.

This is what the gift of piety produces in us: We want to become a cause of joy to the Lord.

Applying this to the relationship between man and woman, it becomes clear what true submission is all about, because the Lord wants His loving relationship with the souls to be reflected in the union between man and woman! Here is the difficulty. It is a high demand that we can only meet to the extent that we allow ourselves to be transformed by the Spirit of God. Only then can we come closer to the words of St Paul and to God's plans for us!

If we are far from this, it is easy to create a false authority mixed with a claim to power, when in reality the beauty of authority shines only to the extent that it acts in love and truth. These claims to power do not come from the Spirit but from the flesh, as Scripture says. This is where the mechanisms of oppression come into play, and the woman begins to fear her husband. This, in turn, can easily lead to inner rebellion, and as a result the wife may no longer respect her husband.

The key to a correct understanding of this passage is therefore love and truth, which make true authority a gift. Thus the wife gives herself willingly to her husband and seeks to honour and respect him. This is analogous to our relationship with the Lord. We willingly serve Him and want Him to be honoured and loved by all.

In a good marriage we can glimpse something of the mystery of God's love for us human beings. The spouses become one flesh, just as we become one with Christ, and the Church, as His Spouse, is united to the divine Spouse.

Let us not be confused by the spirit of the times! Man must discover and live more deeply in God his masculinity and woman her femininity. Submission does not mean loss of identity or oppression. On the contrary, if it is done with the right attitude, it leads to freedom, because who has ever been oppressed by God?

Of course, submission to the Lord has a different level from the submission of a wife to her husband. But if she does so with the necessary freedom, and if the husband strives to love his wife as Christ loves the Church, then we will find in that marriage an image of God's love that reflects both the order of creation and the special mystery between God and the soul.