

Wives *obey* your husbands?

Doug McManaman

Recently I heard two stories related to Paul's *Letter to the Ephesians*: "Wives should regard their husbands as they regard the Lord, since as Christ is head of the Church and saves the whole body, so is a husband the head of his wife; and as the Church submits to Christ, so should wives to their husbands, in everything" (5, 22). One bride-to-be threatened to walk out of the Church if that particular reading was read during her wedding ceremony, while another friend of mine got an earful from an irate woman on the way out of Church: "How could the church publicly have that oppressive, abusive, and offensive reading read in church?"

If, however, these women would listen more carefully to the entire reading, they'd welcome it as wholeheartedly as they now appear to reject it. For there are twelve verses in all, and only one addresses wives, while the rest addresses husbands. In the eleven remaining verses, Paul's admonition, in short, is that husbands must love their wives as Christ loved the Church (Eph 5, 22-33).

What does this mean? In the gospels Christ clearly says: "...the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve" (Mt 20, 28). In other words, the role of the husband is to serve his wife. But over the centuries, men got it backwards, which is probably why Paul spends more time addressing men. If every decision to be made by husbands were ordered principally towards better serving their wives, what woman would not want to submit?

Nevertheless, in any unified community, there cannot exist many heads. There can only be one person who makes the final decision—otherwise some important decisions would never be made. That is why jurors will naturally tend to select a foreman, or why schools have principals. Our principal happens to be a woman, who is well qualified to make final decisions. But holding such an office does not mean that one is expected to be the originator of all the ideas and initiatives that arise within the school community. Any principal will tell you that the best ideas and initiatives, for the most part, come from others. But a prudent and experienced principal will know to permit certain initiatives, modify others, and maybe even refuse some by virtue of past experience.

Similarly, in a family, final decisions have to be made, and some one person has to make them. Who will be that "principal" and what will be the governing norm of all decisions? The fundamental orientation of the husband's life must be the service of his wife, and so the norm of any decision he makes must be none other than what is in her best interest. Thus, if the head of the household is to be the servant, the husband is the head. Moreover, marriage is a sacramental sign of the love that Christ (the head) has for his bride, the Church.

But how this actually works in the family is essentially no different than how decisions are arrived at in a business or school. Authority usually only makes itself felt when the leader makes decisions primarily in his own interests. But when that is not the case, the principal, for example, will seek counsel and consider everyone's input. I know, after twenty-three years of married life, that there are a host of things that my wife can see that I cannot. Women often have a perspective that is missing in men, and vice versa. When husband and wife deliberate on a difficult decision and seek counsel from one another, the best option will usually begin to surface. And that alternative can very often come from the woman. But the move from deliberation and counsel to decision must take place. Someone is going to have to give way. The husband's final decision might very well be to give way to his wife's counsel, but it remains, nonetheless, a final decision. This principle is no more offensive than it is in any other environment. What is offensive is tyranny, which is very often how this chapter of *Ephesians* is misread.

Doug McManaman is a high school religion teacher with the York Catholic District School Board in Ontario. He is currently the President of the Canadian Chapter of the Fellowship of Catholic Scholars.