

## **CHRISTIAN FAMILY: WITNESS TO THE PASCAL COVENANT (Ephesians 5:25-33)**

Particularly today, the Christian family has a special vocation to witness to the paschal covenant of Christ by constantly radiating the joy of love and the certainty of the hope for which it must give an account: the Christian family loudly proclaims both the present virtues of the kingdom of God and the hope of a blessed life to come.

The Church professes that marriage, as the sacrament of the covenant between husband and wife, is a "great mystery" because it expresses the spousal love of Christ for his Church. St. Paul writes, "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" (Ephesians 5:25-26). The Apostle is speaking here about baptism, which he discusses at length in the Letter to the Romans, where he presents it as a sharing in the death of Christ leading to a sharing in his life (cf. Romans 6:3-4). In this sacrament, the believer is born as a new man, for baptism has the power to communicate new life, the very life of God. The mystery of the God-man is in some way recapitulated in the event of baptism. As St. Irenaeus would later say, along with many other Fathers of the Church of both East and West, "Christ Jesus, our Lord, the Son of God, became the son of man so that man could become a son of God" (Cf. *Adversus haereses*, III, 10, 2; PG 7, 873).

There is unquestionably a new presentation of the eternal truth about marriage and the family in the light of the New Covenant. Christ has revealed this truth in the Gospel by his presence at Cana in Galilee, by the sacrifice of the cross, and by the sacraments of his Church. Husbands and wives thus discover in Christ the point of reference for their spousal love. In speaking of Christ as the Bridegroom of the Church, St. Paul uses the analogy of spousal love, referring back to the Book of Genesis, "A man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves to his wife, and they become one flesh" (Genesis 2:24). This is the "great mystery" of that eternal love already present in creation, revealed in Christ, and entrusted to the Church. "This mystery is a profound one," the Apostle repeats, "and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the Church" (Ephesians 5:32).

The Church cannot, therefore, be understood as the mystical body of Christ, as the sign of man's covenant with God in Christ, or as the universal sacrament of salvation unless we keep in mind the "great mystery" involved in the creation of man as male and female and the vocation of both to conjugal love, to fatherhood and to motherhood. The "great mystery," which is the Church and humanity in Christ, does not exist apart from the "great mystery" expressed in the "one flesh" (cf. Genesis 2:24; Ephesians 5:31 & 32), that is, in the reality of marriage and the family.

The family itself is the great mystery of God. As the "domestic church," it is the bride of Christ. The universal Church, and every particular Church in her, is most immediately revealed as the bride of Christ in the "domestic church" and in its experience of love: conjugal love, paternal and maternal love, fraternal love, the love of a community of persons and of generations. Could we even imagine human love without the Bridegroom

and the love with which he first loved to the end? Only if husbands and wives share in that love and in that "great mystery" can they love "to the end". Unless they share in it, they do not know "to the end" what love truly is and how radical are its demands.

--Pontifical Council for the Family