

Homily for August 24, 2003  
21st Sunday in Ordinary Time

By Father Charles Bowes  
Joshua 24:1-2a, 5-17, 18b  
Ephesians 5:21-32  
John 6:60-69

## *Difficult language about God invites us to draw even closer.*

“This language is very difficult! Who could accept it?” Saint John’s gospel places this on the lips of Jesus in chapter six. Jesus had just said, “Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.” It’s no wonder his disciples had trouble with that statement. The odd thing to consider, however, is that today we readily accept this teaching. The language that *we* find difficult - “Who can accept it?” - is found in today’s letter of Saint Paul to the Ephesians chapter five: “Wives be subject to your husbands...for the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the Church.” None of that! The modern woman may easily accept the utter mystery of the Eucharist and bristle at the idea that her husband has been designated head of household by Saint Paul’s teaching. Come on - get real.

Equality of wives and husbands, of men and women, is a broadly accepted moral notion in America and Western Europe. It might be worthwhile to recall, however, that equality of the sexes is still rather new. Women have been allowed to vote in the United States for less than a century, and until the very recent past,

many of the high profile careers had been barred to women by rule or custom. Women still can’t play golf at Augusta National. Equality of women seems to be a clear moral advance for humankind. In fact, many sociologists regard equality of women as a defining mark for developed societies. A recent study of poor countries suggests that the secondary status and role of women is the greatest hindrance to political and economic progress in those areas.

This difficult passage from Saint Paul’s writings has not had a happy history in the Church. Clearly it has been used to justify an unacceptable subservience of women in the family and in general. If it is some consolation to any annoyed women hearing this, it is unlikely that Saint Paul is the author of this letter to the Ephesians. One of Saint Paul’s disciples probably wrote it about 30 years after Saint Paul’s death. But the text is still here, and the Church uses it as part of its canon of scripture. It is important for Catholics to remember that we are not, at least not since the 1940s, biblical literalists. That is reserved for Christian, Jewish and Islamic fundamentalists. Catholics study the scriptures for understanding, using a wide range of interpretive tools...not the least of which is a careful examination of the cultural and historical context from which the writing comes.

The family structure of the first century Middle East was far different from our modern American family. Women took little part in the social, political and religious affairs of the community. Much of the gender-exclusive language of the New Testament reflects not just the style of linguistic usage, but also an expressed expectation that the text was for men only - to be read only by men. This was despite the Lord's specific inclusion of women in his circle of disciples and Saint Paul's establishment of women in positions of community leadership in his early Christian communities. Whoever he was, the author of today's reading held that wives, restricted by their social position, needed to recognize their husbands' advantaged position in the society and follow their lead.

I think the solution, if there is one, can be found in the basic point of the epistle to the Ephesians. It is not a letter about men and women, not about husbands and wives. It is a letter about the nature of the Church. The husband is the head of the wife "as Christ is head of the Church," the passage reads. And the reading goes on: "Husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the Church." The notion of marriage is to be modeled on the notion of Church. Only when one understands "obedience" and "head" in the sense of Christ's relation to the Church can one come to a sense of how men and women, husbands and wives, are to relate to each other. There is to be a mutuality of respect and esteem.

Where does the future lead with all this reflection? I have no idea. But I believe that God is with the Church and with all genuine efforts to follow and listen and hear God speaking through those empowered by the Spirit - that includes men and women.

Notice that in Holy Communion we have the same food for all - it is certainly gender neutral - a sign of the equality we one day shall certainly all enjoy.

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