

# Marriage

by Sebastian R. Fama

Marriage is sometimes referred to as an unnecessary formality. Others see it as something that "**was created for the benefit of men at the expense of women.**" They claim that women are required to vow blind obedience to their husbands? They are not, at least not in the Catholic Church. While there may be some slight differences from country to country, Catholic vows essentially consist of the following:

I, \_\_\_\_\_, take you, \_\_\_\_\_, for my lawful husband / wife, to have and to hold, from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, until death do us part.

The Church does not allow people to write their own vows. They are certainly free to express their feelings and make additional vows after the ceremony. But during the ceremony the vows are set by the Church. And that is because marriage is an ecclesial affair. Vows are not to be reduced to subjective feelings or ideas but rather are a statement of revealed truth.

The "blind obedience" objection is based on a misrepresentation of Ephesians 5:22 which reads in part: "Wives, **be subject to your husbands.**" If we only focus on verse 22 the critics seem to have a case. However, if we look at the entire passage we come to a very different conclusion:

**Be subject to one another** out of reverence for Christ. **Wives be subject to your husbands as to the Lord.** For the husband is 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 she 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." (Ephesians 5:22-31).

Note that Paul starts off his comments with the words: "**Be subject to one another**" – so a husband and wife are to submit to one another. However, the way they are to submit to one another differs. In verses 22-24 Paul explains **how a wife is to submit.** In verses 25-30 he explains **how a husband is to submit.**

Now it is true that Scripture assigns the husband a leadership role. But this does not entitle him to be a dictator or taskmaster. **Jesus makes it clear that to mistreat others is to mistreat Him** (Matthew 25:40). The leadership role that God has in mind here is more along the lines of what the military would call a "Point Man." When out on patrol, the point man leads (walks in front of) the other troops. If they wander into an ambush, he gets the brunt of the attack. Long story short; leadership means service not power. This becomes even clearer when we consider the man's vows. He vows to **love his wife as Christ loved the Church.** And how did Christ love the Church? He healed the sick, fed the hungry and He even washed the feet of His apostles. In a final act of love and humility He willingly submitted to torture and death on a cross so that we, his bride, might have eternal life.

St. John Chrysostom advised husbands to "Love your wives, even as Christ loved the Church... Take the same provident care for her as Christ takes for the Church. Yes, even if it should be necessary for you to give your life for her, yes, and to be cut into pieces ten thousand times and to endure and to undergo any suffering whatever – do not refuse it" (*Homily 20 on Ephesians* circa 400 A.D.).

This sort of arrangement is not unique to marriage. Jesus sets the same standard for Church leaders. In Matthew 20:26-27 He tells His apostles: "Whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave." Accordingly, the popes have referred to themselves as the servant of the

servants of God. All Christians are given a similar command in Philippians 2:3: "Do nothing from selfishness or conceit, but in humility count others better than yourselves." If a man is obligated to have this attitude toward strangers, think how much more this would apply to the woman he has committed his life to.

A husband's primary responsibility is to lead his family to heaven. To teach his children to be humble servants of God and neighbor. Sons learn the proper respect for women by their father's example in the home. And by that same example, daughters learn not to accept anything less. A husband's leadership also includes having the final say in instances where there is an unresolved disagreement. This is necessary to ensure harmony in the family and should present no problem if the husband follows Christ's example as explained above. The husband's role is not a regal privilege but a necessary responsibility. But what if a husband neglects his duties? In his encyclical entitled "*On Christian Marriage*," Pope Pius XI wrote the following: "If the husband neglects his duty, it falls to the wife to take his place in directing the family" (no. 28).

What if the husband turns out to be a tyrant? Does the "for better, for worse" clause require a wife to accept her situation and make the best of it? The simple answer is no, of course not. The Church suggests that the two should separate. Once again Pope Pius XI: "For in certain circumstances **imperfect separation of the parties is allowed... in order to safeguard the education of the children and the wellbeing of the family and to remove all those evils which threaten the married persons, the children and the state**" (no. 89).

**No man has license to abuse his wife or family.** "The battle of the sexes and, particularly, the subjugation of women is the result of original sin and not of God's original design for creation" (*Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Collaboration of Men and Women in the Church and in the World*). Bottom line; a wife is asked to submit to a man who submits to God, puts her needs before his, and is even willing to die for her.

Marriage requires a great deal of work and dedication. That is why Jesus raised marriage to the level of a sacrament. In the sacrament of matrimony, the couple receives graces which specifically enable them to live the married life. It is within the bonds of a sacramental marriage that God is most present in a couple's lives. As the Scripture says: "I can do all things in Him [Jesus] who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:13).

Some believe couples who live together can be just as committed as married couples? Surely everyone is entitled to an opinion. But opinions do not change reality. And reality is where we live. On average, couples who live together (cohabitation) fare much worse than married couples. Sixty percent of cohabiting couples will eventually marry. Unfortunately, the probability of divorce for cohabiters is 200% greater than those who did not cohabit prior to marriage (Family Institute, Duquesne University). Furthermore, a study following more than 11,000 British children from birth through age thirty-three concluded that "a parental divorce during childhood or adolescence continues to have a negative effect [on mental health] when a person is in his or her twenties or thirties" (Andrew J. Cherlin, P. L. Chase-Lansdale, C. McRae, "Effects of Parental Divorce on Mental Health Throughout the Life Course," *American Sociological Review* 63 (1998), 239-249).

Marriage is an essential part of a stable society. Married fathers are, on average, more committed to their children than are unmarried fathers. Studies show that marriage contributes positively to the emotional, physical, and economic health of men, women, and children and thus to the culture as a whole. Cohabitors [who eventually marry] exhibit lower levels of marital interaction and higher levels of marital discord and instability than non-Cohabitors. Drug and alcohol abuse was more likely to appear among Cohabitors than among non-Cohabitors. Physical aggression is more prevalent among Cohabitors. Cohabitors are three times more likely to engage in extramarital affairs. Economically, cohabitation appears to reinforce discrimination based on gender since recent studies indicate that women contribute between 65-70% of the financial resources in these unions. Additionally, women Cohabitors indicate that they undertake an undue proportion of the duties and responsibilities necessary to maintain these households (Family Institute, Duquesne University).

Marriage is about commitment; cohabitation is about convenience. When we consider all the facts, we can see that cohabitation and not marriage "**was created for the benefit of men at the expense of women.**"