

ARTICLE 6



The Lumen Fidei Institute

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Marriage a gift from God – The Church's Understanding through Scripture

St Peter on Marriage

We have seen that *Dei Verbum* says “the interpreter of Sacred Scripture, in order to see clearly what God wanted to communicate to us, should carefully investigate what meaning the sacred writers really intended, and what God wanted to manifest by means of their words.”. With this in mind let us have a look at St Peter's thoughts on how Catholic husbands and wives should behave. It is interesting to remember that St Peter himself was married so he speaks from experience. It is in his first letter that St Peter addresses the issue of married life in chapter three verses one through seven.

“In like manner also let wives be subject to their husbands: that if any believe not the word, they may be won without the word, by the conversation of the wives. Considering your chaste conversation with fear. Whose adorning let it not be the outward plaiting of the hair, or the wearing of gold, or the putting on of apparel: But the hidden man of the heart in the incorruptibility of a quiet and a meek spirit, which is rich in the sight of God. For after this manner heretofore the holy women also, who trusted in God, adorned themselves, being in subjection to their own husbands: As Sara obeyed Abraham, calling him lord: whose daughters you are, doing well, and not fearing any disturbance. Ye husbands, likewise dwelling with them according to knowledge, giving honour to the female as to the weaker vessel, and as to the coheirs of the grace of life: that your prayers be not hindered.”
(1 Peter 3:1 – 7)

Submission – Subjection – Not very Romantic?

The phrase “In like manner” refers to submission to authority which has been mentioned twice previously in this letter. In the first instance St Peter tells the Christians to be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution and he mentions the King and the King's governors as examples. In the second instance St Peter exhorts servants to be subject to their masters regardless of whether the master is good or bad. St Peter then goes on to exhort wives to be subject to their husbands “in like manner”.

To the modern mind the very idea of subjection is very difficult to comprehend at face value. St Peter does not specifically condone slavery, yet neither does he seem to condemn it. He then tells wives to behave in the same way that he has told the slaves to behave before telling the husbands to give honour to the wives as to the weaker vessel. Not a very romantic view of marriage this and it would seem to reinforce the apostles viewpoint from St Matthew's Gospel that if this is what marriage is like then it is better not to get married.

What does St Peter actually mean?

The key to understanding these passages of St Peter is to look to what meaning he is trying to convey and also to discern what God wants to manifest to all men, of all times, through this

particular piece of scripture taken within the context of the whole canon of scripture. For St Peter the issue that he is dealing with is not slavery nor is it the submission and subjugation of wives to their husbands. St Peter is looking at what it means to be a Christian and he seeks to encourage those for whom the letter is intended to live holy lives regardless of whether or not their circumstances are good or bad.

A Revolution of the Heart

St Peter is not trying to start a revolution within society aimed at overthrowing unjust structures rather he seeks to encourage and to maintain a revolution in the hearts of Christian men and women in order to convert souls to Christ. He is primarily concerned with the interior lives of the early Christians and with forming disciples who are willing to follow Christ even to the point of suffering. A Christian who lives in difficult times must do his best to live a holy Christian life in just the same way as a Christian who lives in seemingly easier times. St Peter wants us to be followers of Christ and to bear witness to Christ in how we live our lives. The essential message for all of us is that we will win souls to Christ more by how we live our lives than by what we say.

Suffering for Christ's sake

The servants become like Christ by living holy lives despite their servitude and in fact St Peter tells them that it is in accepting unjust suffering for the sake of God's kingdom that they most resemble Christ for, Christ himself suffered unjustly for the sins of men. When Christ was reviled He Himself did not revile and when He suffered He did not threaten but rather He trusted Himself and His whole situation to God the Father knowing that the Father would bring good out of it. In like manner husbands and wives are to try to live holy lives by entrusting their sufferings and their lives to God.

Conversion through witness and a holy life

Some of the wives that are addressed by St Peter were married to pagan men and St Peter, solicitous for the salvation of these men, urges the women to be subject to their husbands by living holy lives conformed to Christ thereby hoping to save their husbands who, on witnessing their wives' Christian behaviour will be converted themselves to Christ. He then exhorts the Christian husbands to have respect for their wives keeping in mind that women are physically weaker than men but are also co-heirs and equals in sharing the grace of a Christian life. The prayers of Christian husbands are of no avail if the husband does not have proper respect for his wife.

St Peter's first letter exhorting Christians to be firm in their faith in times of trial was written in a time of growing hostility to Christians. The early Christians were suffering persecution and ridicule for their faith and St Peter urges them to look beyond the suffering to the great glory that awaits those that remain faithful to Christ. His main concern, as is always the case for the Church, is for the salvation of souls. This context is particularly relevant to our own times in Ireland and elsewhere in the western world where Catholics are once again facing the threat of persecution and ridicule on account of professing our faith publicly.

To change Hearts

St Peter knows that in order to conform society to Christ it is necessary to change individual hearts by leading souls to Christ's merciful love. If we focus on the society itself we may have short term success but the fruits will be short lived. St Peter's words to wives in particular, concerning the conversion of their husbands by living holy Christian lives, have borne fruit in the lives of many women both in the distant and recent past. In the next article we will have a brief look at the extraordinary lives of Blessed Elizabeth Canori Mora and also the more recent '*Servant of God*' from France, Elisabeth Leseur. These women gave practical application to the words of St Peter which eventually brought both of their husbands to embracing the Catholic faith, and even more extraordinarily, to the priesthood, just as St Peter predicted was likely to happen.

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