



We live in an age in which speaking about the roles of men and women in marriage seems almost provocative. Some consider it outdated; others, dangerous. Yet the Church — from the Apostles to today — has taught that marriage is not a changing cultural construct, but a **divine design inscribed in creation and elevated by Christ to the dignity of a sacrament.**

If we want to understand it correctly, we must turn to one of the deepest and most demanding passages of the New Testament: **Ephesians 5:21-33**. There, Saint Paul gives us a theological vision so elevated that it completely transforms the modern discussion.

This article does not aim to impose rigid schemes, but to **discover the beauty of God’s plan**, to understand its theological depth, and to offer concrete pastoral guidance for living it today, amid the cultural challenges of our time.

1. The Context: Ephesians 5 Is Not a Domestic Manual — It Is a Mystical Revelation

The key text says:

“Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her.” (Eph 5:25)

And before that it states:

“Wives, be subject to your husbands as to the Lord.” (Eph 5:22)

Read superficially, this may seem like a harsh or even unjust hierarchy. But verse 21 — often omitted — establishes the interpretative key:

“Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ.” (Eph 5:21)



This is not about domination. It is about **mutual self-gift**.

Saint Paul is not designing a patriarchal system; he is revealing a mystery:

Christian marriage is a visible image of the love between Christ and the Church.

And here we enter the heart of the matter.

2. The Theological Foundation: Creation, Fall, and Redemption

To understand the roles, we must return to Genesis.

In Genesis we read:

“So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.” (Gen 1:27)

Sexual difference is not a biological accident nor a cultural construction. It is part of the **language of love inscribed by God into human nature**.

Before sin:

- There was harmony.
- Authority meant service.
- Difference meant complementarity.

After sin:

- The struggle for power appears.
- The desire to dominate.
- The rupture of communion.

Christ comes to restore the original plan. That is why, when Saint Paul speaks about marriage, he does not do so from the fallen logic of domination, but from the redeemed logic of the Cross.



3. The Role of the Husband: Sacrificial Leadership, Not Authoritarianism

Ephesians 5 is radically demanding of the man:

| *“Husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the Church.”*

How did Christ love?

- By giving Himself.
- By serving.
- By washing feet.
- By dying on the Cross.

The husband’s leadership is not control, but **spiritual responsibility**.

Theologically, the husband is called to be:

- Head in the sense of a principle of unity.
- Protector.
- Provider not only materially, but spiritually.
- The first to sacrifice himself.

Pastorally, this means:

- Praying for his wife.
- Defending her dignity.
- Listening with humility.
- Making decisions seeking the common good.
- Being the first to ask forgiveness.

If a man uses Ephesians 5 to dominate, he has betrayed the text. The model is not the authoritarian patriarch. It is Christ crucified.



4. The Role of the Woman: Strong Receptivity, Not Servile Submission

The word “submission” today provokes rejection. But the original Greek term (hypotasso) implies freely ordering oneself out of love.

According to Ephesians 5, the woman represents the Church responding to Christ’s love. This is not passivity. It is **an active response to self-giving love**.

Theologically, the wife is called to:

- Recognize and sustain her husband’s sacrificial leadership.
- Contribute intuition, sensitivity, and relational wisdom.
- Be the heart of the home.
- Create communion.

In Catholic tradition, far from being secondary, woman is exalted in the figure of the Virgin Mary, whose free obedience changed history.

Mary was not passive. She was courageous, steadfast, faithful even to the Cross.

Christian submission is not servility.

It is loving cooperation within an order that seeks the common good.

5. Equal Dignity, Distinct Mission

The Church has always taught that man and woman possess **equal ontological dignity**.

The modern problem is not the pursuit of equality — which is legitimate — but the confusion between equality and uniformity.

We are not interchangeable.

We are complementary.



Sexual difference is not competition; it is vocation.

When differences are denied, there arise:

- Identity confusion.
- Crisis of authority.
- Disorientation in children.
- Fragile marriages.

The Christian model does not eliminate differences. It harmonizes them.

6. History: How This Was Lived in the Christian Tradition

In the early centuries, Christianity revolutionized the Roman world:

- It forbade the abandonment of infant girls.
- It elevated the dignity of women.
- It condemned arbitrary divorce.
- It demanded mutual fidelity.

Christian marriage was countercultural.

For centuries, the Church taught that the husband must love first and sacrifice first. When authentically lived, this structure did not produce oppression but stability.

Historical abuses do not invalidate the doctrine; they reveal its failure to be lived.

7. Practical Applications Today (Very Concrete)

For the man:

1. Take spiritual initiative at home.
2. Do not delegate all religious matters to your wife.
3. Learn to listen without feeling attacked.
4. Do not confuse leadership with imposition.



5. Love even when you do not receive an immediate response.

For the woman:

1. Support your husband publicly.
2. Correct in private, with respect.
3. Do not ridicule his weakness.
4. Foster family unity.
5. Remember that your emotional influence is powerful.

For both:

- Pray together.
- Make important decisions through dialogue.
- Practice constant forgiveness.
- Seek spiritual direction if necessary.

8. The Great Mystery: Marriage Is a Living Catechesis

Saint Paul concludes by saying:

“This is a great mystery, and I mean in reference to Christ and the Church.” (Eph 5:32)

Marriage is not only for the happiness of the spouses.

It is a **living icon of the Gospel**.

When the husband loves like Christ, the world sees sacrifice.

When the wife responds with fidelity, the world sees the Church.

In a culture where:

- Commitment is trivialized,
- Masculinity is ridiculed,
- Motherhood is suspected,



- Radical autonomy is promoted,

A faithful Christian marriage is a silent revolution.

9. The Errors We Must Avoid Today

From a rigorous pastoral perspective, we must reject:

- Machismo disguised as tradition.
- Radical feminism that denies difference.
- Male passivity.
- Female emotional manipulation.
- Power struggles within the home.

Ephesians 5 does not legitimize abuse.
It indirectly condemns it by demanding crucified love.

10. Conclusion: Returning to Christ to Save Marriage

The problem today is not that Ephesians 5 is too demanding.
It is that we have stopped living it.

The man is afraid to lead for fear of appearing authoritarian.
The woman is afraid to trust for fear of being erased.

Only in Christ is that distrust healed.

When the husband looks at the Cross, he learns to love.
When the wife looks to Mary, she learns to trust.
When both look to the altar, they remember that their love is a sacrament.

God’s plan is not a chain.
It is a path to holiness.

And perhaps today, more than ever, the world needs to see marriages that demonstrate that



difference does not divide when love is true.

Because in the end, roles are not a structure of power.
They are a shared vocation toward sanctity.

And that — far from being oppressive — is profoundly liberating.