

Toward a Proper Understanding of Headship in Marriage

By Dorothea Ludwig-Wang, 22 May 2022

The concept of headship in marriage is a topic that many Catholic theologians are hesitant to discuss today, given the pervasive influence of feminism over modern society. In an age whose values are predicated upon individualism and meritocracy, St. Paul's command for women to "be subject to their husbands, as to the Lord" (Eph. 5:22) and Pius XI's teaching concerning "the ready subjection of the wife and her willing obedience"¹ are dismissed as examples of pre-conciliar bigotry. On the contrary, a proper understanding of headship reveals that it is neither oppressive to the liberty of the wife, nor incompatible with the fundamental equality each man and woman possesses due to being made in the image of God (Gen. 5:2). In fact, it is a beautiful representation of supernatural realities.

First and foremost, because the part is directed to the whole, it is necessary to understand that God desires that there be different elements in human societies that come together in harmony. It is an observable fact that He endows each person with different talents and gifts by nature or by extraordinary grace, because He intends that they should do different things. St. Paul explains that "the body is one, and hath many members" (1 Cor. 12:12), and that likewise, the Body of Christ is made up of many members who must mutually cherish each other (1 Cor. 12:25). Not all are called to be apostles, prophets, miracle-workers, etc., but there is a "more excellent way" (1 Cor. 12:31), and that way is charity.

In contrast to the popular notion of "equality of opportunity," so beloved by modern thinkers, the Church teaches that God endowed human beings not only with different attributes, but also different functions, and that the natural order is not a meritocracy. The only true meritocracy that exists pertains to the supernatural order: God gives each person, after the age of reason, sufficient grace for salvation, and whoever ranks higher than another in heaven does so on account of his or her cooperation with this grace. These rankings do not exist due to natural abilities, which cannot suffice to reach a supernatural end, or even extraordinary spiritual gifts, as *gratia gratis data* is directed to the good of the community, not oneself. Whoever is closest to God in heaven will be the one who *loved* the most, having followed the most perfect way.

St. Thérèse of Lisieux writes:

I understood that the Church being a body composed of different members, the most essential, the most noble of all the organs would not be wanting to her; I understood that the Church has a heart and that this heart is burning with love; that it is love alone which makes the members work, that if love were to die away apostles would no longer preach the Gospel, martyrs would refuse to shed their blood. I understood that love comprises all vocations, that love is everything, that it embraces all times and all places because it is eternal!²

1 Pius XI, *Casti comubii*, 26.

2 Society of the Little Flower, "St. Therese Quotes." *LittleFlower.org*, <https://www.littleflower.org/st-therese/st-therese-quotes/>.

In the supernatural order, charity determines one's standing. But in the natural order, there is no meritocracy concerning vocations, which are not about what one is capable of *doing*, but about one's very *identity*. There is a tendency in the modern world to regard so-called "role-playing" as something fundamentally dangerous to the so-called "true self," which is alleged to be completely free from external influences, and this simply is not true. Our "true self" is not the self we are currently, but the self that God wants us to become, and He intends to bring about this conversion through assigning us a role and helping us to perform it well. And these roles can correspond with sex, showing why God created us male and female.

The fact that only a woman can consecrate her virginity to God as a Spouse of Our Lord, and that only a man can be ordained, suffices to demonstrate this point. Some proponents of female ordination have argued that women are just as capable of performing the physical acts in celebrating the sacraments and might actually be more skilled in pastoral things—but though cake is sweeter than bread, Our Lord chose bread for the Eucharist, and He chose men for the priesthood. Had He wanted female priests, He could have easily chosen His own mother, who could quite literally say "*hoc est enim corpus meum*," but He did not. Because God created men to represent His authority, those who exercise authority in the Church—who herself is feminine—ought to be male.

But if man is superior to woman in authority by divine ordinance, which is what makes him eligible for the priesthood and a holder of jurisdiction, the woman is superior in the strength of her love. So while he is called to be the head of society, she is called to be its heart, and her "subjection" can only be understood in light of the Church's desire that the heart not "be separated from the head to the great detriment of the whole body and the proximate danger of ruin...as [the man] occupies the chief place in ruling, so [the woman] may and ought to claim for herself the chief place in love."³ As St. Thérèse wrote, the heart is actually the "most noble" organ, because it is associated with charity, which is the power that makes it possible for the men to persevere in their leadership role. This is why Abp. Fulton Sheen says in *Life is Worth Living*:

When a man loves a woman, he has to become worthy of her. The higher her virtue, the more noble her character, the more devoted she is to truth, justice, goodness, the more a man has to aspire to be worthy of her. The history of civilization could actually be written in terms of the level of its women.

By explaining why the notions of "being man" and "being woman" can only be truly and completely understood in light of supernatural realities, with the man representing God's authority and the woman representing God's love, one begins to understand how and where modern feminists err on the concept of male headship. Simply put, the modern mind is incapable of possessing a truly supernatural worldview, which creates a tendency toward naturalism that misunderstands the purpose, meaning, and significance of headship according to the broader picture of God's plan for the world.

As explained above, it is clear that vocations cannot be understood in light of modern notions of meritocracy, as though one can "earn" a vocation to the priesthood, to consecrated

3 *Casti connubii*, 27.

virginity, to marriage, etc. It is God who does the calling, and it is He who decides what role we shall occupy in the grand scheme of things; our duty is to follow where He calls us and accept His will for our lives. The modern thinker, however, embraces the meritocratic mindset of our day and age, which is why it is logical for him to assume that if men are given headship, then it must be because men are superior in ability and qualities to women. Such a conclusion contradicts the observable complementarity of the sexes and must be rejected, but it would be an error to conclude such from the existence of headship itself and consequently decry it as bigoted.

The error is predicated upon a failure to distinguish the man from the office: the head of the family possesses authority not because he earned it through his own merits (in fact, his wife may very well be superior in leadership ability, which she may exercise in other contexts), but due to the natural order of the family, and God is the author of nature. Thus, the husband and father is the head of the family, while the wife and mother is the heart, and this structure exists by divine ordinance, not by personal merit. This mirrors the powers of the human soul, which is created in the image of God: the heart (the will) follows the head (the intellect), which means that the union of man and woman in marriage also images God in a certain way.

This is not to say that the man has a stronger intellect, or the woman a stronger will, but simply that their complementary functions in the family follow the pattern found in the human soul. For while an individual soul is in the image of God *essentially*, when this image is defined *accidentally*, one can see that man and woman come together to produce it completely. Ultimately, the two act as one union, subject to Christ, much like in a dance, where one leads and the other follows, but both ultimately are subject to the music. If the leader is superior to the follower, this refers to a primacy of authority, which is purely a matter of function, not a superiority of person or qualities. Adam was created first, which makes him the first principle and thus superior in authority, but it was Eve whose creation perfected human nature, making her superior in love.

While the masculine and feminine are two different “forms” of the same human nature, the latter “form” is more perfect in love; but despite this aspect of superordination, the woman fills a subordinate *role* in the family, and these two things actually harmonize perfectly. The lowest things build up to the highest things: it was not until the sixth day that God created human beings in His image, who have the capacity to return His love. The last to be created was the woman, because she holds the potential to bring forth new life, cooperating with God to create the next generation of human beings to love Him. Men provide the foundation, while women perfect it, so a woman’s higher attributes can only be realized through a subordinate role that follows the male lead, without injury to the essential equality of the sexes.

Only through grace, which builds upon nature, can we reach our supernatural end, and it is through our vocation that God intends to bring us to Himself. If He calls a man to be a husband and father, He will give him the graces to fulfill his duties, even if he is not naturally a strong leader. Likewise, if God calls a woman to be a wife and mother, He will give her the graces to fulfill her duties, even if she is not naturally tender, empathetic, and nurturing. If one does not trust God to provide, then one has no option but to rely on one’s own abilities, which—no matter how great—are necessarily incomplete and imperfect. A man who fails to grasp this constantly tries to prove his own greatness: far from confident in his masculinity, this kind of man is really an insecure child who constantly requires validation.

Further, the Church teaches that the proper exercise of authority is never directed toward the benefit of oneself, but rather the common good of society. The greatest in authority among us is called to serve (Matt. 23:11); the pope is called the “servant of the servants of God” for a reason. The worldly, naturalistic view, however, treats authority and power as things that exist solely for personal gain and the pleasure of dominating others. The modern world speaks of rights, but never of the duties that those rights presuppose! In reality, if husbands have headship over their wives, it is because they are called to *serve* their wives just as Christ loved the Church and died for her, and in particular to reverence and protect her sacred life-giving potential.

When feminists view history with a secular lens, they complain about the predominance of men; but when we examine the history of our redemption, we see that women are very much in the foreground. At the Annunciation, Mary was alone with the angel; Joseph did not enter the picture until later, when he was finally given understanding. Elizabeth, a woman, was the first to recognize Mary as “the mother of my Lord” (Luke 1:43). Other than John, it was the women who followed Our Lord to the Cross; meanwhile, Judas perpetrated the betrayal for thirty pieces of silver, and Peter denied Our Lord three times out of fear of mere mortals. Veronica comforted Him willingly; Simon of Cyrene was forced to carry the Cross with Him. And it was Mary Magdalene who announced the Resurrection!

Anything that men do must be done through women: “...when barbarism was being civilized and tamed, women such as Theodolinda, Clothilde and Radegonde exercised an influence greater than that of any woman in the modern period.”⁴ These women were the sacred vessels through which Christendom was established: while temporal works will pass away at the end of time, the souls saved through their influence will enjoy an eternity in heaven. When a mother cooperates with God to bring about new life, she is likewise engaging in a work that will last for eternity. If a husband does not understand the vocation of his wife, then he will inevitably abuse his authority, which is conferred not for the benefit of the self, as the modern individualist would have it, but for the sake of the common good. As the moral theologians McHugh and Callan explain:

[O]bedience is due a husband in domestic matters in which he is head of the house—for example, the choice of the place of residence, the management of the family income, the discipline of the children, but not in the wife’s personal affairs (e.g., her conscience, her politics, her property)... Moreover, since the wife is a partner and not a servant, and since she usually excels as sympathetic and wise adviser and careful household manager and is naturally more virtuous, the husband should consult with her on important family questions and decide them as far as possible by mutual consent, and should gladly leave to her sole control and direction the many things in which she is more competent than himself.⁵

With regard to the marriage contract itself and the payment of the marital debt, the two spouses are equal in their rights and obligations; as the essence of the marriage contract consists

4 R. Amerio, *Iota Unum: A Study of Changes in the Catholic Church in the XXth Century* (Kansas City, MO: Sarto House, 2012), 215.

5 J. McHugh and C. Callan, *Moral Theology* (New York: Wagner, 1929), 2:2626b.

of exchanging the right over the body as regards the act suitable to the generation of offspring, the two parties are equally responsible for consent, equally powerless to dissolve the bond, and equally obligated to pay the debt to each other. This is due to the relation of the “active” to the “passive,” which is “the coordination of the two unequals in an equalizing unity.”⁶ Psychologically, the woman is ordered above the man: she deposits the seed of attraction, while he responds by bringing it to fruition through loving her. Physiologically, during the marital act, the man is ordered above the woman: he deposits the seed into her womb, which she brings to fruition by bearing new life.

Feminists will decry the burden that falls upon women in the generation of offspring: the man experiences a momentary pleasure, and his task is completed, while the woman goes through nine months of physical changes and possible sickness, eventually culminating in the pain of childbirth, which prior to modern times could easily mean the sacrifice of her life. But from a supernatural perspective, this is in fact a great benefit to the woman, as she is saved through childbearing (1 Tim 2:15), which applies not only to physical mothers, but also spiritual mothers, who are the vessels through which other souls are sanctified.

The modern world presents two errors with the same root, one of deficiency and another of excess. Feminism denies the goodness of diversity and complementarity, and thus wishes to do away with headship altogether, decrying it as oppressive. Some conservative men, usually members of fundamentalist Protestant denominations but also some Catholics of a more “traditional” bent (so to speak), err by excess through distorting the meaning of headship, turning it into a caricature that actually *is* oppressive to their wives. Both of these errors stem from a failure to root one’s perspective in the supernatural: the part is directed to the whole, and the individual is directed to the greater order of God’s creation.

One of the greatest proofs of the truth of our religion is this: Catholicism alone gives a beautifully, perfectly coherent account of the human person as created in the image of God, and explains how this image is reflected in the three societies established by divine institution: the family, civil society, and the Church. When we once again recognize the Social Kingship of Christ, men and women will see that it is senseless to envy each other’s particular callings and functions.

6 Amerio, 210.