

**On the Absorption of “Headship” by Christ: Reading *Casti Connubii* (and the Tradition) in  
Light of the Insights of John Paul II**

Michael Healy<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract**

This piece was delivered as a talk at the ACPA convention in Chicago, November 2024, as part of a satellite session in conjunction with the John Paul II Institute at the University of St. Thomas, Houston, TX. It has been considerably expanded, especially the opening section detailing background and anticipations in Wojtyła’s earlier thoughts (40’s to 70’s) on marriage before his ascendancy to the papacy. Then I compare his teaching on mutual submission in Christ in marriage to Pius XI teaching on headship and show both deep continuity and great innovation.

**Keywords**

John Paul II, Karol Wojtyła, *Casti Connubii*, Pius XI, headship, mutual submission in Christ, Mulieris Dignitatem

---

<sup>1</sup> Michael J. Healy – Veritas Center for Ethics in Public Life at Franciscan University of Steubenville, Ohio  
e-mail: MHealy@franciscan.edu

Pope St. John Paul II, in his many writings on marriage, man and woman, and sexuality, never affirms the notion of the headship of the man in marriage in the manner seeming to flow from St. Paul and through the earlier tradition of the Church. Rather than the headship of the husband and the submission of the wife to it, he stresses mutual submission in Christ. Evidently, he offers a tremendous development of the tradition concerning the equality of the spouses. Does this mark a sharp break or even rejection of previous teachings, themselves scripturally based? If so, what does this say about the inerrancy of scripture and the reliability (or indefectibility) of Church tradition? Is there a serious problem here? Or is John Paul II offering us a truly creative development of the tradition, not a contradiction. In this paper, I investigate these questions in relation to the more “traditionalist” encyclical of Pope Pius XI, *Casti Connubii* (1930).

## Background and Anticipations

### *The Jeweler's Shop*

However, before diving into such comparisons, it is important to see the roots of John Paul II's thoughts on these matters in the decades preceding his ascendancy to the papacy. Though many in the Church may have been surprised, even startled, by his apostolic letter *Mulieris Dignitatem* (1988) and his teaching on the mutual submission in Christ of the marital pair, rather than the image of the headship of the man, these reflections involved no new or sudden breakthrough for Karol Wojtyła himself. Indeed, this kind of equality of man and woman in marriage is illustrated in the opening scenes of his most famous play *The Jeweler's Shop* (published 1960, written in the 50's, but tracing its ancestry back to the Rhapsodic Theater of the 40's),<sup>2</sup> already in the way Andrew and Teresa speak of engagement and marriage:

Teresa

Andrew has chosen me and asked for my hand....

We were just walking on the right side of the market  
square when Andrew turned around and said,

---

<sup>2</sup> K. Wojtyła, *The Jeweler's Shop: A Meditation on the Sacrament of Matrimony, Passing on Occasion into a Drama*, trans. B. Taborski (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1980), 13- 15.

“Do you want to be my life’s companion?”  
That’s what he said. He didn’t say: do you want to be  
my wife,  
but: my life’s companion.<sup>3</sup>

Andrew also reflects on the equality of man and woman in love, on the way in which they complete one another:

Andrew

I thought much at the time about the “alter ego.”  
Teresa was a whole world, just as distant  
as any other man, any other woman  
--and yet there was something that allowed one to think  
of throwing a bridge....

I decided then to seek a woman who would be indeed  
my real “alter ego” so that the bridge between us  
would not be a shaky footbridge among the water lilies and  
reeds.<sup>4</sup>

Shortly thereafter comes the beautiful scene, and symbolism, of Teresa seeking a pair of high-heeled shoes so that she would look directly into his eyes, on the same level, when she joins with him as “forever”<sup>5</sup> life’s companions, rather than the gaze being up and down—again the stress on the equality of the marital pair in this very early work:

Teresa

I was looking for high-heeled shoes.  
There were many sports shoes,

---

<sup>3</sup> Wojtyła, *The Jeweler’s Shop*, 23.

<sup>4</sup> Wojtyła, *The Jeweler’s Shop*, 25.

<sup>5</sup> Wojtyła, *The Jeweler’s Shop*, 29. Here Andrew’s question is presented as, “Would you like to become forever my life’s companion?”

many comfortable walking shoes,  
but I was really straining my eyes  
for high-heeled shoes.

Andrew is so much taller than I  
that I have to add a little to my height  
--and so I was thinking about Andrew,  
about Andrew and about myself.<sup>6</sup>

Then, after looking in the window of the jeweler's shop, they buy the pair of wedding rings, one for each, again symbolizing equality—rather than only the wife wearing a wedding ring as was often the custom in many places in the past. Teresa then imagines their wedding, as equals kneeling before Christ:

Teresa

Imagination worked, though. I already saw, as in a  
mirror,  
myself, in a white wedding dress, kneeling with Andrew,  
dressed in a black suit. As we entered the church  
I equaled him in height, inasmuch as there was no  
disproportion  
(this was why I had to buy the high-heeled shoes  
I saw today in that other window).<sup>7</sup>

These are wonderful, living images of equality and mutual submission in Christ in this early drama about marriage that anticipate his later teachings in philosophy and theology, and—as the Holy Father—in his letters and encyclicals.

---

<sup>6</sup> Wojtyła, *The Jeweler's Shop*, 32.

<sup>7</sup> Wojtyła, *The Jeweler's Shop*, 35.

*Love and Responsibility*

We find further anticipations of his papal teaching on mutual submission in his study of conjugal love in *Love and Responsibility*, published originally in 1960, but also developed in the 50's. For example, he acknowledges that on the psychological level marriage and the marital act might be experienced more naturally as a receptive openness and complete self-gift on the part of the woman, while in the man the experience might be more akin to conquest or possession. However, he then explicitly says that to do justice to the true nature and fullness of this state (and act) of reciprocal love, the man must go beyond this psychological level to the ethical dimension wherein he too must make a complete gift of himself to the woman he loves. In the subsection on "Betrothed Love" he writes:

As far as surrender in the first (the psychological) sense is concerned, it is only the woman, or at any rate it is above all the woman, who feels that her role in marriage is to give herself; the man's experience of marriage is different, since 'giving oneself' has as its psychological correlative 'possession.' However, the psychological approach is insufficient here for if we think the problem through objectively, and that means ontologically, what happens in the marital relationship is that the man simultaneously gives himself, in return for the woman's gift of herself, and thus although his conscious experience of it differs from the woman's it must nonetheless be a real giving of himself to another person. If it is not there is a danger that the man may treat the woman as an object, and indeed an object to be used. If marriage is to satisfy the demands of the personalistic norm it must embody reciprocal self-giving, a mutual betrothed love. The acts of surrender reciprocate each other, that of the man and that of the woman, and though they are psychologically different in kind, ontologically they combine to produce a perfect whole, an act of mutual self-surrender. Hence the special duty devolves upon the man: he must give to 'conquest' or 'possession' its appropriate form and content—which means that he too must give himself, no less than she does.<sup>8</sup>

This is a powerful expression of the equality and complementarity of the man and the woman in marriage, the deepest truth of their relationship, which John Paul II will later bring out more fully

---

<sup>8</sup> K. Wojtyła, *Love and Responsibility*, trans. H.T. Willets (New York: Farrar-Straus-Giroux, 1982), 99.

in *Mulieris Dignitatem* and in his reflections on Genesis and the theology of the body. He reemphasizes the point a few sections later in the subsection on “Membership of One Another:”

For contrary to the superficial view of sex, according to which love (meaning here erotic love) culminates in a woman’s surrender of her body to a man, we should rightly speak of the mutual surrender of both persons, of their belonging equally to each other. Not mutual sexual exploitation, with ‘x’ giving her body to ‘y’ to possess, so that each can obtain the maximum of sexual pleasure, but the reciprocated gift of self, so that two persons belong each to the other—this is the only full and satisfactory description of ‘betrothed love,’ which finds its fulfillment in marriage.<sup>9</sup>

Again, a few pages later in the same section, he continues to emphasize equal and reciprocal gift at the heart of marriage:

Betrothed love comprises on the one hand the gift of the person, and on the other hand, acceptance of that gift. Implicit in all this is the ‘mystery’ of reciprocity: acceptance must also be giving, and giving receiving.... This skill creates the specific climate of betrothed love—the climate of surrender of the innermost self. Both man and woman need this genuine capacity for affirmation of the value of the person, if the gift of self is to be fully valid, and equally if the acceptance of the gift is to be valid.... Realization of the value of the gift awakens the need to show gratitude and to reciprocate in ways which would match its value. We can also see here how essential it is for betrothed love, a love which is a reciprocal giving of self, to contain the inner structure of friendship.<sup>10</sup>

Finally, in Chapter IV “Justice Towards the Creator” we see an anticipation of the teaching in *Mulieris Dignitatem* on mutual submission in Christ in Wojtyła’s description of the unique right of the Creator over the betrothed couple seeking His approval of their equal self-gift in mutual submission to Him:

---

<sup>9</sup> Wojtyła, *Love and Responsibility*, 126.

<sup>10</sup> Wojtyła, *Love and Responsibility*, 129.

Now, both the proprietary right which each of the persons has in relation to himself or herself and still more the *dominium altum*, which the Creator enjoys in relation to each of them, lie outside the field of immediate experience and are accessible only to reason. But if the couple accept, as every religious human being must, this supreme proprietorial right they must seek justification above all in his eyes, must obtain His approval. It is not enough for a woman and a man to give themselves to each other in marriage. If each of these persons is simultaneously the property of the Creator, He also must give the man to the woman, and the woman to the man, or at any rate approve the reciprocal gift of self implicit in the institution of marriage.<sup>11</sup>

Later in this article, I shall have further occasion to refer to *Love and Responsibility* in connection with the parallel I describe between Wojtyła's description of "the absorption of shame by love"<sup>12</sup> and what I call the "absorption of headship by Christ." Note that "absorption" here does not mean elimination. "To say that shame is 'absorbed' by love does not mean that it is eliminated or destroyed."<sup>13</sup> It rather means that it is no longer needed in the specific context of Christian marriage informing the sexual sphere:

True love ensures that these experiences are imbued with affirmation of the value of the person to such an extent that it is impossible for the will to regard the other person as an object for use. In practice, this is where the real strength of love lies—mere theoretical affirmation of the value of the person is not enough.

Given such an attitude there is no reason for shame...<sup>14</sup>

However, Wojtyła does caution that a deep marital love must be kept alive by the couple if this transformation is to continue. He writes, "...this awareness, unless it is cultivated as it should be, may die away, to the detriment of the persons and their mutual love."<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> Wojtyła, *Love and Responsibility*, 224.

<sup>12</sup> Wojtyła, *Love and Responsibility*, 181-186.

<sup>13</sup> Wojtyła, *Love and Responsibility*, 182.

<sup>14</sup> Wojtyła, *Love and Responsibility*, 183-184.

<sup>15</sup> Wojtyła, *Love and Responsibility*, 182.

*Sources of Renewal*

Let us now turn to a third source, this time from the early 70's, in Wojtyła's reflections on implementing Vatican Council II, wherein he prefigures his later papal teachings on marriage, though in more subtle and indirect ways. Originally published in 1972, these reflections on the implementation of Vatican Council II, display some parallel themes to what we have been discussing. However, these are now writ large on the face of the Church, though with relevance to all smaller communities and especially to the family as the domestic church. Again, as in the examples above, mutual subordination in Christ, in the priesthood of Christ, attains a foundational and formative role in relation to other dimensions of the Church as a community. He writes, "Only against the background of the truth concerning Christ's priesthood, in which all the People of God share, does the Council delineate the mutual 'subordination' between the priesthood of all the faithful and the hierarchical priesthood."<sup>16</sup> In other words, while acknowledging with Vatican II the special place and authority of the hierarchy in the Church, he gives a priority to mutual subordination in Christ. As he says, "In light of these texts, we can see clearly the reciprocal 'subordination' of the general and the hierarchical priesthood in the Church. Christ instituted the latter as a function of the former...."<sup>17</sup> Moreover, though he is speaking directly of the whole Church, he points out that this mutual sharing and subordination is valid for each individual and for each smaller community:

In this light, the attitude which derives from sharing in the priesthood of Christ... also shows us its proper place in the life of every Christian and of every Christian community, in which the wealth of faith must be sought and developed. It can in a sense be said that the doctrine concerning Christ's priesthood and man's share in it is at the very centre of the teaching of Vatican II and contains in a certain manner all that the Council wished to say about the Church, mankind and the world.<sup>18</sup>

He later elaborates on the latter thought in interpreting the ecumenical approach stressed at Vatican II. He writes, "Thus the ecumenical attitude is rooted in the faith in the fatherhood of God

---

<sup>16</sup> K. Wojtyła, *Sources of Renewal: The Implementation of the Second Vatican Council*, trans. P.S. Falla (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980), 225.

<sup>17</sup> Wojtyła, *Sources*, 227.

<sup>18</sup> Wojtyła, *Sources*, 225.



embracing the universe and in the redemption of Christ, which is offered to all men without exception.”<sup>19</sup> He then emphasizes, for the Church, the primacy of prayer in “the whole of its ecumenical action”<sup>20</sup> and in this light, he goes so far as to say, “It is not only a question of praying for our separated brethren but also of praying with them so that the Church may become one.”<sup>21</sup> These reflections all point toward a primacy of mutual subjection in Christ even within the hierarchical Church. He also quotes Vatican II on the family as “the domestic sanctuary of the Church,”<sup>22</sup> —and of course marriage is the foundation of the family.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, as we shall see in the course of this article, mutual submission in Christ is even more crucial and appropriate in the intimate communion of marriage than in the universal Church.

*Person and Community, “The Family as a Community of Persons”*

This article, originally published in 1974,<sup>24</sup> again stresses equality and mutual submission to one another and to Christ in forming and living out the marriage covenant, foreshadowing his teaching in *Mulieris Dignitatem*. He writes:

The basis of the family is *marriage*. Marriage is not just a partnership, but it is—and ought to be—a real *communio personarum*, as we read in the Latin text of *Gaudium et Spes*. “Ought to be,” because a *communio personarum* is always an ethical reality. Understood in the light of revelation, marriage presupposes the whole theological anthropology we find expressed in *Gaudium et Spes* 24. This is, as we have seen, an anthropology of person and gift: as “the only creature on earth that God willed for itself,” the human being strives to find himself or herself in the full sense “through a disinterested gift of himself or herself.” This gift of self lies at the basis of the marriage covenant, bringing to it the special dimension of love that we find in the concept of *married love*. The husband and wife are mutually each other’s beloved when they enter into the marriage covenant, and this covenant—also as a legal act—testifies that they have both made a mutual gift of themselves. The Council speaks here

---

<sup>19</sup> Wojtyła, *Sources*, 313.

<sup>20</sup> Wojtyła, *Sources*, 319.

<sup>21</sup> Wojtyła, *Sources*, 318.

<sup>22</sup> Wojtyła, *Sources*, 295.

<sup>23</sup> Wojtyła, *Love and Responsibility*, 217.

<sup>24</sup> K. Wojtyła, *Person and Community: Selected Essays*, trans. T. Sandok (New York: Peter Lang, 1993), 315 (note at bottom).

explicitly of a covenant, whereas the *Code of Canon Law* defines marriage as a contract. The conciliar term is more profound, theological, and personalistic, although the legal aspect is not lost in it. “The deep community of married life and love has been established by the Creator and qualified by the Creator’s laws. It is consolidated in the marriage covenant by irrevocable personal consent. In this way, by the personal act through which the spouses mutually give themselves to and accept each other, there arises by divine will, and in the eyes of society as well, a lasting institution” (*Gaudium et Spes* 48).<sup>25</sup>

Having reviewed a number of anticipations over several decades (stretching from the 40’s to the 70’s), of John Paul II’s papal teachings on marriage, let us now turn to a comparison of the thoughts of Pius XI and of John Paul II concerning the Church’s understanding of the marital relationship.

### **Marital Relations in *Casti Connubii***

First, let us review the parts of this encyclical which are *evidently compatible with and re-affirmed in the writings of John Paul II* and which specifically have to do with equality between man and woman in marriage and mutual submission in Christ as the deepest truth about the marital relationship. In Paragraph 23 of *Casti Connubii*, Pius writes:

23. This conjugal faith, however, which is most aptly called by St. Augustine the “faith of chastity” blooms more freely, more beautifully and more nobly, when it is rooted in that more excellent soil, the love of husband and wife which pervades all the duties of married life and holds pride of place in Christian marriage. For matrimonial faith demands that husband and wife be joined in an especially holy and pure love, not as adulterers love each other, but as Christ loved the Church. ... This outward expression of love in the home demands not only mutual help but must go further; must have as its primary purpose that man and wife help each other day by day in forming and perfecting themselves in the interior life, so that through their partnership in life they may advance ever more and more in virtue,

---

<sup>25</sup> Wojtyła, *Person and Community*, 323.

and above all that they may grow in true love toward God and their neighbor, on which indeed “dependeth the whole Law and the Prophets.”<sup>26</sup>

Already, this paragraph seems to imply a primacy of a mutual submission in Christ and mutual help toward transformation in Christ “pervading” all other levels of relationship in marriage. This is key in *Casti Connubii* and will be brought out much more explicitly as foundational in John Paul II’s *Mulieris Dignitatem*. John Paul says in Section 7 of that encyclical: “This also explains the meaning of the ‘help’ spoken of in Genesis 2 :1 8-25: ‘I will make him *a helper fit for him*’... it is a question of a ‘help’ *on the part of both, and at the same time a mutual ‘help’*.”<sup>27</sup>

Thus, we find continuity here, not a sudden break with tradition. But Pius XI goes on to further emphasize the point in the following two paragraphs.

24. This mutual molding of husband and wife, this determined effort to perfect each other, can in a very real sense, as the Roman Catechism teaches, be said to be the chief reason and purpose of matrimony, provided matrimony be looked at not in the restricted sense as instituted for the proper conception and education of the child, but more widely as the blending of life as a whole and the mutual interchange and sharing thereof.<sup>28</sup>

25. By this same love it is necessary that all the other rights and duties of the marriage state be regulated as the words of the Apostle: “Let the husband render the debt to the wife, and the wife also in like manner to the husband,”[28] express not only a law of justice but of charity.<sup>29</sup>

So, “mutual molding” is the “chief reason and purpose of matrimony”—not forgetting about but not limiting marriage to its natural procreative end—and seeing marriage as a “blending of life” and “mutual interchange and sharing thereof.” Moreover, according to Pius XI, “all other rights

---

<sup>26</sup> Pius XI, *Casti Connubii* [Encyclical Letter on Chaste Wedlock]. The Holy See. December 31, 1930, sec. 23. [https://w2.vatican.va/content/pius-xi/.../hf\\_p-xi\\_enc\\_19301231\\_casti-connubii.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/pius-xi/.../hf_p-xi_enc_19301231_casti-connubii.html), (28.02.2025).

<sup>27</sup> John Paul II, , sec. 7.

[https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost\\_letters/1988/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_apl\\_19880815\\_mulieris-dignitatem.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_letters/1988/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_19880815_mulieris-dignitatem.html) (28.02.2025).

<sup>28</sup> Pius XI, *Casti Connubii*, sec. 24.

<sup>29</sup> Pius XI, *Casti Connubii*, sec. 25.

and duties of the marriage state must be regulated” by this equality and mutual obligation toward one another in Christ, the man and the woman in debt to each another equally before Christ both in “justice” and in “charity.” Moreover, all this is stated first—and thus is foundational in interpreting what follows in *Casti Connubii*, i.e., the affirmation of the more traditional teaching of the “order of love” involving the leadership or headship of the husband. Pius XI proclaims first the fundamental equality before Christ in Paragraphs 23-25, and then a relative inequality in Paragraph 26.<sup>30</sup> Before addressing what John Paul II does with this teaching, however, let us first list what I count as 9 qualifications of the husband’s “primacy” or the wife’s “subjection” (words used in Para. 26 of *Casti Connubii*).

According to Para. 27, this “subjection, however, does not deny or take away:”<sup>31</sup>

- 1) “the liberty which fully belongs to the woman...in view of her dignity as a human person,”<sup>32</sup> and which JP II elaborates on in his personalist philosophy and in *Mulieris Dignitatem*;
- 2) “and in view of her most noble office as wife and mother and companion,”<sup>33</sup> often denigrated in the modern world but never by JP II, nor by Pius XI;
- 3) “nor does it bid her obey her husband’s every request,”<sup>34</sup> —unfortunately, headship and submission are sometimes interpreted in this kind of an uncritical “fundamentalist” way, but Pius XI already rejects such a reading;
- 4) “if not in harmony with right reason”<sup>35</sup> —clearly implying that the woman has a responsibility to make her own judgment as to whether the request is in harmony with right reason. She has to use her own reason and take her own responsibility here as a genuinely “acting person”—which may, of course, then provoke intense dialogue with her husband;
- 5) “or [if not in harmony] with the dignity due to the wife”<sup>36</sup> (clearly implying her rights and her own responsibility to defend them in marriage and in the family);

---

<sup>30</sup> Pius XI, *Casti Connubii*, sec. 26: “Domestic society being confirmed, therefore, by this bond of love, there should flourish in it that ‘order of love,’ as St. Augustine calls it. This order includes both the primacy of the husband with regard to the wife and children, the ready subjection of the wife and her willing obedience, which the Apostle commends in these words: ‘Let women be subject to their husbands as to the Lord, because the husband is the head of the wife, and Christ is the head of the Church.’”

<sup>31</sup> Pius XI, *Casti Connubii*, sec. 27.

<sup>32</sup> Pius XI, *Casti Connubii*, sec. 27.

<sup>33</sup> Pius XI, *Casti Connubii*, sec. 27.

<sup>34</sup> Pius XI, *Casti Connubii*, sec. 27.

<sup>35</sup> Pius XI, *Casti Connubii*, sec. 27.

<sup>36</sup> Pius XI, *Casti Connubii*, sec. 27.

- 6) “nor, in fine (and by these words he is clearly emphasizing the following point), does it imply that the wife should be put on a level with those persons who in law are called minors, to whom it is not customary to allow free exercise of their rights on account of their lack of mature judgment, or of their ignorance of human affairs.”<sup>37</sup> Here he is strongly emphasizing the equality and maturity of the marriage partners in any healthy relationship. Pius then elaborates on certain dangers here: “But it forbids that exaggerated liberty which cares not for the good of the family; it forbids that in this body, which is the family, the heart be separated from the head to the great detriment of the whole body and the proximate danger of ruin. For if the man is the head, the woman is the heart, and as he occupies the chief place in ruling, so she may and ought to claim for herself the chief place in love.”<sup>38</sup> Here he seems to imply, what JP II will again much more clearly elaborate, a complementarity in the midst of the equality, each with his or her own rights and duties *and relative priorities*—but rejecting the “exaggerated liberty” which modern feminism often encourages, i.e., putting self first even above solemn commitments and natural responsibilities toward both spouse and children.
- 7) Moving on to paragraph 28, Pius XI affirms further that both the *degree* and the *manner* of this relation of wife to husband, i.e., the meaning of “subjection,” “may vary according to the different conditions of persons, place and time.”<sup>39</sup> Thus he is acknowledging that the notion of “headship” is a very fluid one, difficult to describe, not one-size-fits-all, but rather which must be creatively worked out between the unique personalities, and which must be adapted to different times and places—thus it is certainly not time-bound, for example, to just the historical circumstances of St. Paul. Therefore, he leaves ample room here for the historical development of a deeper understanding of the marital relationship, which John Paul II will be happy to offer us, even moving beyond Pius XI own guidelines.
- 8) Further in paragraph 28, Pius XI affirms that “if the husband neglects his duty, it falls to the wife to take his place in directing the family.”<sup>40</sup> This means, quite evidently, standing up to the husband if necessary, telling him off if he needs it, refusing his “lead” or rejecting “submission” if this is for the true good of the husband himself, or for the true good of the

---

<sup>37</sup> Pius XI, *Casti Connubii*, sec. 27.

<sup>38</sup> Pius XI, *Casti Connubii*, sec. 27.

<sup>39</sup> Pius XI, *Casti Connubii*, sec. 28.

<sup>40</sup> Pius XI, *Casti Connubii*, sec. 28.

wife, or for the true good of both as a couple, or for the true good of the children, or for the true good of the family as a whole.

- 9) Finally, in paragraph 29, Pius quotes Leo XIII saying the type of obedience envisioned here is “not as a servant but as a companion”<sup>41</sup> (implying equality, maturity, co-responsibility), so that “nothing be lacking of honor and of dignity”<sup>42</sup> in the relationship, but that “divine charity be the constant guide of their mutual relations....”<sup>43</sup>

### **The Innovation of *Mulieris Dignitatem***

Now, moving on to John Paul II’s creative innovation and development of these teachings—and the reasons why he refuses to put things in the above terms of obedience and subjection, of “headship,” even with all these qualifications—let me first quote *Mulieris Dignitatem* and then make several interpretive remarks and suggest answers to some objections. I think it important to quote the key passage at length. After speaking of the “sincere gift of self” reciprocally called for on the part of both men and women, John Paul II famously says (in *Mulieris Dignitatem*, Section 24 entitled “The Gospel Innovation”):

The author of the Letter to the Ephesians sees no contradiction between an exhortation formulated in this way and the words: “Wives, be subject to your husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife” (5:22-23). The author knows that this way of speaking, so profoundly rooted in the customs and religious tradition of the time, is to be understood and carried out in a new way: as a “*mutual subjection out of reverence for Christ*” (cf. *Eph* 5:21). This is especially true because the husband is called the “head” of the wife *as* Christ is the head of the Church; he is so in order to give “himself up for her” (*Eph* 5:25), and giving himself up for her means giving up even his own life. However, whereas in the relationship between Christ and the Church the subjection is only on the part of the Church, in the relationship between husband and wife the “subjection” is not one-sided but mutual.

---

<sup>41</sup> Pius XI, *Casti Connubii*, sec. 29.

<sup>42</sup> Pius XI, *Casti Connubii*, sec. 29.

<sup>43</sup> Pius XI, *Casti Connubii*, sec. 29.

In relation to the “old” this is evidently something “new”: it is an innovation of the Gospel. We find various passages in which the apostolic writings express this innovation, even though they also communicate what is “old”: what is rooted in the religious tradition of Israel, in its way of understanding and explaining the sacred texts, as for example the second chapter of the Book of Genesis.

The apostolic letters are addressed to people living in an environment marked by that same traditional way of thinking and acting. The “innovation” of Christ is a fact: it constitutes the unambiguous content of the evangelical message and is the result of the Redemption. However, the awareness that in marriage there is mutual “subjection of the spouses out of reverence for Christ,” and not just that of the wife to the husband, must gradually establish itself in hearts, consciences, behavior and customs.

But *the challenge presented by the “ethos” of the Redemption* is clear and definitive. All the reasons in favour of the “subjection” of woman to man in marriage must be understood in the sense of a “mutual subjection” of both “out of reverence for Christ.” The measure of true spousal love finds its deepest source in Christ, who is the Bridegroom of the Church, his Bride.<sup>44</sup>

I would like to make several comments on this central and innovative passage and how to understand it in relation to the tradition.

### *Interpreting Headship*

First, if one reviews the above nine clarifications, qualifications, restrictions, and *exceptions* to the notion of “headship” from Pius XI, one cannot help but notice that any crude, reductionistic interpretation here (as seemingly has been the case in certain protestant traditions, covenant communities, or fundamentalist approaches) is deeply at odds not only with John Paul II but also with Pius XI and the great Catholic intellectual tradition of understanding and interpretation on

---

<sup>44</sup> John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, sec. 24.

this theme.<sup>45</sup> So, it is not only John Paul II who is our source for rejecting false notions of authority in marriage, but also Pius XI, Leo XIII, and the tradition. John Paul II innovates here but he also deeply develops what is partially expressed and what is still latent in the tradition.

One way of interpreting headship, which might illustrate the equality dimension more clearly, is that it implies more of an initiatory or leadership role rather than a strict command-and-obey relationship. For example, someone has to lead, and someone has to follow if a couple are to do a beautiful waltz together, yet they are certainly equal partners in the dance. The implication flowing from such an image is certainly not one of authority and submission. I don't say that this image does full justice to the traditional interpretations of headship, but it might offer a helpful balance and more positive meaning to the understanding of the tradition.

### *I-Thou Communion and We-Communion in relation to Headship*

Second, one can attempt to deal with the equality/mutual-submission-in-Christ dimension of marriage vs. the headship/authority-submission dimension of marriage in the following way. We can distinguish two different levels or types of communion in human relationships and in marriage: an I-Thou communion and a We-communion. The image capturing I-Thou communion is of two people facing one another, gazing into each other's eyes, and is the perfect image for the fundamental equality and mutual submission (in Christ) of lovers united in betrothal. This is the dimension in which any hint of "command" or demand for "obedience" would be abhorrent, completely out of place, insulting, unheard of.

However, the image of the We-community is of two people standing side-by-side facing the world together, looking out from themselves as a couple (or a family) and making decisions about the world and their lives in it. From this side-by-side We-perspective, one might argue that two people of equal authority can't really govern well (e.g., a company, or even the Church), but that someone has to have the deciding vote or there will be paralysis.

---

<sup>45</sup> Interestingly, the philosopher John Locke also disputes the fundamentalist interpretation of Adam's dominance over Eve (as argued by Sir Robert Filmer as a prelude to affirming monarchy as the divinely ordained form of government), on biblical and philosophic grounds in his *First Treatise on Government*, Book I, Ch. 5, para. 44. He writes that, since God was "declaring his wrath against them both, for their disobedience, we cannot suppose that this was the time, wherein God was granting Adam prerogatives and privileges, investing him with dignity and authority, elevating him to dominion and monarchy: for though as a helper in the temptation, as well as a partner in the transgression, Eve was laid below him, and so he had accidentally a superiority over her, for her greater punishment, yet he too had his share in the Fall, as well as the sin, and was laid lower, as may be seen in the following verses [in Genesis]...." Some fruitful comparisons might be made between Locke's arguments and John Paul II's interpretation, but that would be a topic for another reflection.



In fact, the I-Thou communion as a type of communion (in this case of spouses) is deeper, more intimate, and much more all-inclusive than the We-communion. So, along these lines, one might interpret John Paul II's teaching on equality and mutual submission in Christ as true on the deepest level of I-Thou conjugal intimacy, while the traditional understanding of some qualified authority (as in *Casti Connubii*) to the husband might be seen as true on a secondary level in terms of the We-communion (in relation to the rest of the world) that marriage also represents. Both levels would be acknowledged as valid, but John Paul II's approach would be seen as deeper and more foundational. Thus, he would be guiding the whole tradition to a more genuine level of interpretation and understanding: equality on the deepest personal dimension, headship only on a restricted practical level, if needed, to resolve an impasse, and with many qualifications.

#### *I-Thou Communion Itself in Need of Christ's Direction*

Though helpful, I think this interpretation based in the two main types of communion does not yet do justice to John Paul II and to the creative newness of his thought, while still being a development of the tradition. He goes further than the above paragraph's image of two valid levels, the one (I-thou) deeper than the other (We). I think his deeper innovation, and the reason why he *never brings up the notion of authority and obedience in marriage, of "headship," but only mutual submission to one another in Christ*, is that in meditating on the theme of equality in the conjugal I-Thou love relationship (already acknowledged in *Casti Connubii* as the deepest level, in light of which all else must be interpreted) he concludes that the level of "authority," of operating out of the We-communion model of headship, *would only be necessary if there has been a prior failure in the intimate I-Thou conjugal level of relationship and communion*. But, according to John Paul II, in *Mulieris Dignitatem*, Section 10, there has been such a failure, as a result of original sin:

The biblical description in the Book of Genesis outlines the truth about the consequences of man's sin, as it is shown by *the disturbance of that original relationship between man and woman* which corresponds to their individual dignity as persons.... Therefore when we read in the biblical description the words addressed to the woman: "*Your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you*" (Gen 3:16), we discover a break and a constant threat precisely in regard to this "unity of the two" which corresponds to the dignity of the image and likeness of God in both of them.... While the violation of this equality, which is both

a gift and a right deriving from God the Creator, involves an element to the disadvantage of the woman, at the same time it also diminishes the true dignity of the man. Here we touch upon *an extremely sensitive point in the dimension of that “ethos”* which was originally inscribed by the Creator in the very creation of both of them in his own image and likeness.<sup>46</sup>

Thus, sin affects not only the We-communion, but also the I-Thou communion of the couple in love and in marriage, though there are marvelous remnants and anticipations of the more perfect love of Christ and in Christ in the “inloveness” of the marital pair.

We can recognize here how a couple tends to behave toward each other when they are in the midst of falling in love, though they may not yet understand what strength and sacrifice it takes to live out this love for a lifetime: each more eager than the other to sacrifice, to put the other first, to accommodate for the sake of the other, to yield where possible, looking happily for such occasions, while both take responsibility for the good of the whole. Self-surrender for the sake of the other becomes a source of intense joy, even ecstasy, in the depths of such a relationship. C.S. Lewis in *The Problem of Pain*, Chapter 5 on “The Fall of Man,” describes this as follows [my brackets]:

The self-surrender [to God and to one another] which [“paradisaal man:” Adam and Eve] practiced before the Fall meant no struggle but only the delicious overcoming of an infinitesimal self-adherence which delighted to be overcome—of which we see a dim analogy in the rapturous mutual self-surrenders of lovers even now.<sup>47</sup>

In such a state of genuine mutual devotion and self-giving, especially as deepened and enlightened by Christ, John Paul II is saying that the couple deeply in love—but devoted to Christ first as King and Center of all Hearts, as Fountain of Life and Holiness—will find a way to work things out through mutual subjection to Him, each ready to sacrifice if that is better for the other or for the whole. Consensus can and will be reached by lovers having these attitudes, if their natural “inloveness” is itself regrounded in the sacrificial love of Christ and the example he has set. And this reference to Christ, this mutual subjection to Christ, is necessary because only in Christ can

---

<sup>46</sup> John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, sec. 10.

<sup>47</sup> C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York; HarperCollins, 2001), 76.

we know what our true good and true happiness consists in, only in Christ can we recognize the depth of our limits and our sin. Only in Christ can we know and be formed by our true end. Thus, it is only if all this is lost (ultimately through neglect based in sin) that “authority” would ever rear its head.

Therefore, in purifying the ideal for marriage, Wojtyła takes what has always been presented in the tradition *as the light in which all else is meant to be interpreted* (equality and mutual submission), and reasons forward that there is actually no place for “authority” or “headship” when the couple is genuinely grounded in betrothed love transformed in Christ. The need for “headship” is absorbed in Christ, in *mutual love and mutual submission in and to Christ as their true authority and guide*. But, what is this “absorption”?

Perhaps we can see a parallel here to Wojtyła’s teaching in *Love and Responsibility* about the need for “shame” being absorbed into conjugal love. Outside the fully committed Christian conjugal relationship, shame has a positive role in defending, revealing, and encouraging the full truth about the person (not to be treated as a sexual object),<sup>48</sup> but within genuine Christian marital love, this role would no longer be needed. The role of shame is absorbed in conjugal love in Christ and would not have to be discussed within marriage unless there is a breakdown due to sin of this whole truth:

Externally (i.e., as seen by anyone other than the partner in love) love in its physical aspect is naturally inseparable from shame, but within the relationship between the man and the woman concerned, a characteristic phenomenon occurs which we shall call here ‘the absorption of shame by love.’ Shame is as it were, swallowed up by love, dissolved in it, so that the man and the woman are no longer ashamed to be sharing their experience of sexual values.<sup>49</sup>

Similarly, in intimate Christian I-Thou conjugal love, itself regrounded in mutual submission in Christ, headship need no longer play a role unless there is a breakdown due to sin. Headship is absorbed in love, as is shame. Neither headship nor shame have a needed or necessary role to play any longer. The place of headship is not denied or contradicted under certain conditions related to

---

<sup>48</sup> Wojtyła, *Love and Responsibility*, 181.

<sup>49</sup> Wojtyła, *Love and Responsibility*, 181.

sin, neither is shame, but neither headship nor shame is any longer part of the lived ideal. With Christ's restoration of marriage to the Father's original ideal there is no longer any place for: "*Your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you*" (Gen 3:16)—not where mutual submission in Christ is carried out truly, i.e., ultimately in saintliness.

This deeply reinforces the idea that the married partners have to keep their I-Thou betrothed love alive so as to inform the We-Communion dimension of their relationship. But even more, they must keep their intimate relation to Christ alive. If the love of Christ informs their lives and their love for one another, if He is both their head and the center of their hearts, then "headship" and "submission" between the couple will not be needed. It is subsumed in love of Christ. Christ is needed as guide and authority, as head of the couple, because even I-Thou betrothed love on the (now fallen) natural level doesn't seem to be enough to fully overcome the tendency to dominance, our tendency after the fall. Christ comes to reclaim and restore something of the original innocence, though we can never fully go back to it. Man and woman need Christ as head of the Church, as head of their lives, as head of their relationship, and as head of their family, as the heart of their love in order not to fall back into a relationship of even subtle and indirect dominance rather than the unique balance within the relationship which each couple must prayerfully work out for themselves in the light of Christ.

### *Replies to Objections*

However, two objections must be further considered. First, sometimes, John Paul II's teachings on love and marriage (like Dietrich von Hildebrand's) are regarded as too idealistic, even unrealistic, as if a *fairy tale* idea of loving and decision making. However, in this case, isn't John Paul II just saying what any good marriage counselor would also say, "First, try to work it out between you by loving discussion, then—if necessary (i.e., if mutual agreement cannot be reached but a decision is immanent and necessary)—the one with greater expertise in the area addressed would have to make a decision in light of the good of the whole." So, this weight of decision-making on one marital partner (taking into account the other as best as possible) may be necessary, but not the ideal. In fact, the reality of mutual subjection in Christ, and of imitating Christ in His laying down His life for us, should make coming to a mutually agreed decision more likely.

Second, as mentioned earlier, some would object that two people of equal power, or even more of shared equal power, cannot successfully govern—or at least not without great difficulty.

Such considerations seem to hold for the We-communion model of a relationship, even though various prior agreements may help work out an impasse. For example, in a business context, in an article in *Forbes* magazine entitled “The Top Four Decision-Making Frameworks For An Equally Owned Company,” Doug Bend writes, concerning the “unanimous consent” requirement of such an arrangement, “The drawback is that a 1-1 vote resulting in a tie can lead to deadlock and inaction at best, and at worst it can result in a lawsuit between two frustrated founders who feel the other is preventing the company from moving forward.”<sup>50</sup> Some might argue then that the headship of the man is needed in a marriage, on the We-communion level, so as not to fall into paralyzing impasse, frustration, inaction, resentment, etc. However, marriage is not to be reduced to nor interpreted merely as a legal contract between business partners. As argued above, in the intimacy of I-Thou betrothed love, “headship” is absorbed in Christ, in *mutual love and mutual submission in and to Christ as the couples’ true authority and guide*. The We-communion itself is regrounded in the I-Thou intimacy or the couple. This intimacy-in-Christ cannot be compared to a mere contract.

However, employing a more pertinent example, someone might argue that even in a Christian community of love, e.g., the Church herself, the Body of Christ, doesn’t someone have to stand out with real authority in certain situations? That is, isn’t something more needed at times than just mutual service and mutual subjection to Christ, e.g., when it comes to the hierarchy, the bishops? Don’t we need a St. Peter, a Pope, an authority, not just all “equal” with perhaps a symbolic “first among equals” but with no real authority? So, if this is true of the Church, wouldn’t something similar be necessary also on the level of marriage? However, something that is true and necessary on the level of such a larger and more varied community as the Church may not be at all true, much less the necessary ideal, for an intimate married couple whose love is grounded in Christ. And it is this intimate I-thou community in Christ, which grounds the We-dimension of the relationship and the natural community of the family, as describe in the reply to the first objection.

---

<sup>50</sup> J. Bend, “The Top Four Decision-Making Frameworks For An Equally Owned Company,” Young Entrepreneurs Council for Small Businesses and Entrepreneurs, sec. 1, para. 2.  
<https://www.forbes.com/councils/theyec/2018/10/03/the-top-four-decision-making-frameworks-for-an-equally-owned-company/> (28.02.2025).

## Bibliography

Bend, J., “Young Entrepreneurs Council (YEC) for Small Businesses and Entrepreneurs.”

Pius XI. *Casti Connubii* [Encyclical Letter on Chaste Wedlock] (The Holy See, December 31, 1930).

John Paul II. *Mulieris Dignitatem* [Encyclical Letter on the Dignity and Vocation of Women] (The Holy See, August 15, 1988).

Lewis, C.S. *The Problem of Pain* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001).

Wojtyła, K., *Love and Responsibility*, trans. H.T. Willets (New York: Farrar-Straus-Giroux, 1982).

Wojtyła, K., *Person and Community: Selected Essays*, trans. T. Sandok (New York: Peter Lang, 1993).

Wojtyła, K., *Sources of Renewal: The Implementation of the Second Vatican Council*, trans. P.S. Falla (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980).

Wojtyła, K., *The Jeweler's Shop: A Meditation on the Sacrament of Matrimony, Passing on Occasion into a Drama*, trans. B. Taborski (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1980).