

“And while he slept, he took one of his ribs and enclosed it in flesh.”

Gen 2:21

In both the First Reading today and the Gospel passage we hear about God’s plan for marriage, namely that it is to be between one man and one woman, that it is for the bringing forth into the world new life as part of a collaboration with God’s work of creation, and that it is to be a bond for life between the two spouses as part of a covenant with God, thereby forming a tripartite union between God, husband, and wife, reflecting the Trinitarian nature of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

But the Second Reading from the Letter to the Hebrews adds another dimension to our thoughts. By speaking of Our Lord’s death, and the power of that death to sanctify and to lead many into glory, the Second Reading turns all of today’s readings into a meditation on the nature of the relationship between Christ the Bridegroom and His Mystical Bride, the Church.

In the Book of Genesis we read how, whilst Adam slept, God took one of his ribs and enclosed it in flesh. From this action, Woman, Man’s partner in God’s work of creation, his helpmate, and his lifelong companion, was formed. Similarly, as Our Lord slept in death on the Cross, a Roman soldier pierced His side with a lance and there flowed out blood and water. All the Fathers of the Church tell us that this flowing forth of blood and water gave us the beginnings of the Church, as the sanctifying waters of Baptism and the merciful Blood of God’s forgiveness for sins flowed forth from Christ’s wounded and Sacred Heart.

In the Christ’s Bride, the Church, we see Our Lord’s Mystical Spouse working as His partner in the work of re-creation in the order of grace, as souls are brought to a share in everlasting life in Baptism, a helpmate in the work of teaching and sanctifying souls, and

ordering them towards heaven, and a life-long companion as the Church leads and guides us along the path of virtue throughout our days here on earth.

Again and again, we hear the Church described as the People of God, but Pope John Paul II, in his book *Sources of Renewal* written whilst he was still a cardinal during the 1960s, said that we cannot understand the Church as the People of God unless and until we have first understood the Church as the Mystical Body of Christ. The reason is, quite simply, that we are members of the Church but even collectively we do not make up the whole Church. The Church is something supernatural, and is far bigger and greater – She has greater substance and reality – than the total number of people who belong to Her. She is more than the sum of Her parts (1 Cor 12:27).

So, what is the Church? There are many images of the Church in Scripture that help us to understand who and what She is, and what She does. The Church is likened, among other things, to a sheepfold (Jn 10:1-10), to a flock of sheep (Is 40:11; Ex 34:11), to a cultivated field and to a building (1 Cor 3), to a vine (Jn 15:1-5), to the country or the household of God (Eph 2:19,22), and to the dwelling place of God (Apoc 21:3). The Church is seen as our Mother (Gal 4:26; Apoc 12:17). But more consistently than anything else – in the image most commonly used throughout the Scriptures, in almost every book of the Bible from Genesis at the beginning to the Book of the Apocalypse at the end – the Church is seen as the spotless spouse of the Spotless Lamb (Apoc 19:7; 21:2,9; 22:17). The Church is the Spouse of Christ, the Mystical Bride of Our Lord. It is she whom Christ loved, and for whom He delivered Himself up that He might sanctify Her (Eph 5:25-26).

Christ is wedded to His Church. He is devoted to Her. He has laid down His life for Her. And He has taken Her to Himself that together they might form an inseparable bond of love.

Whilst Her members – you and me – may not be spotless or without wrinkle (Eph 5:27), nonetheless She, as Christ’s Mystical Bride, *is* holy and without blemish (ibid) precisely because She is more than the sum of Her parts; She is made up of more than all the people who belong to Her. As we say in the Creed every week, ‘I believe in one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church.’ She is holy even if Her members are not.

And She is holy because the Holy Spirit forms the soul of the Church, and is Her life-giving principle. It is the breath of the Holy Spirit that gives the Church life and that sanctifies Her and makes Her holy quite independently of the holiness or otherwise of Her members. Just as God’s perfection is not dependent on whether His creatures are holy, so the holiness of the Church does not depend on the holiness of Her members.

Even so, as the Letter to the Hebrews says, ‘the One who sanctifies, and the ones who are sanctified, are of the same stock.’ In other words, by uniting individual members of the Church to Himself in the Sacraments, Christ conforms us to a greater likeness of Himself so that, belonging to Christ and in union with Him, we may be said, since our Baptism, to be of the same stock and hence co-heirs with Christ (Rom 8:17) to all the graces and spiritual blessings of heaven (Eph 1:3).

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