

n. 14 *Matrimony*

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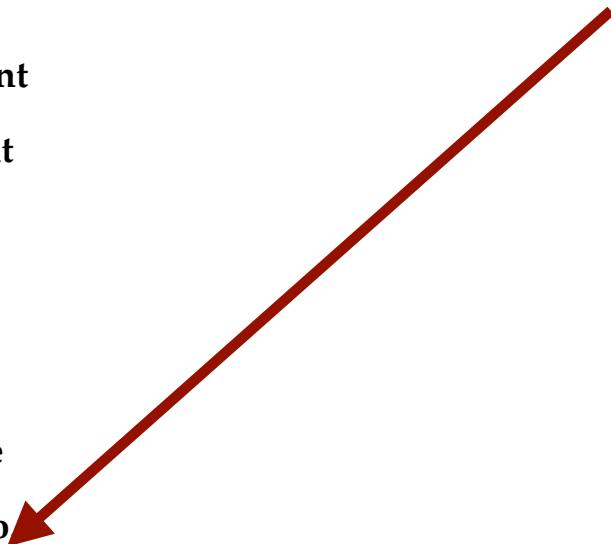
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n. 14. Matrimony



Catechism 26. Sacrament of Matrimony n. 1601-1666

n. 1601

‘The matrimonial covenant, by which a man and a woman establish between themselves a partnership of the whole of life, is by its nature ordered towards the good of the spouses and the procreation and education of offspring. This covenant between baptised persons has been raised by Christ the Lord to the dignity of a sacrament’ (Canon 1055§1)

- Authors draw on an ancient myth with a long oral history.
- They are not interested in myth-as-such or in its cultic expression.
- They are interested in real people's lives, and therefore in human behaviour and responsible action, formalised in a description of the human-being-as-such ['adam], and the various basic relationships within which human beings live their lives.

God said, “Let us make humankind [’adam] in our image, according to our likeness” (Genesis 1:26).

- able to be in communion with God
- able to carry on God’s action in bringing order out of chaos
- able to co-create human beings
- Human beings can be understood only in relation to God. They are, therefore, essentially mysterious.

‘let them rule over [radah] all living creatures’ (Genesis 1:26).

In Ezekiel 34:4 the king is likened to a shepherd who should ‘rule over’ [radah] the people with kindness. His is a shepherding role, not one of self-serving domination. In ‘ruling over’ all living creatures, human beings are to continue God’s work of bringing order out of chaos.

‘So God created humankind [’adam] in his image, in the image of God he created them; male [zakar] and female [nekebah] he created them. God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and make it subject to you” (Genesis 1:27-28).

‘And God saw that everything that he had made was very good’ (Genesis 1:31).

Genesis 2

The authors also speak of the paradox of being human, the dust and the spirit, the sanctity and the sin, the wonder and the limitations that we all experience.

‘YHWH God formed the human being [’adam] from the dust of the ground [’adamah] and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the human being [’adam] became a living being’ (Genesis 2:7).

- Human beings come from the dust but live because of the divine spirit.
- Human beings are to live in dialogue with God and in dependence on God’s word.

‘YHWH God said, “It is not good that the human being [’adam] should be alone; I will make for him a helper who will face him.” ... Then the human being [’adam] said, “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman [’ishshah], for out of Man [’ish] this one was taken” (Genesis 2:18, 23).

- Male and female are both part of the original creation of humanity [’adam].
- Man [’ish] does not exist before woman [’ishshah], nor are they created separately. God created humankind [’adam] and then divided what he had created in two. Each part lacks the other.

- Human beings are man and woman facing each other in equality and delight. They need each other in order to carry on the blessing and give life.
- The first direct speech of a human being is a cry of delight from a husband to a wife.

Ephesians 5:21

Be subject to one another out of reverence for the Messiah.

The basic virtue for social life is for the members to be ‘**subject** [ὑποτάσσω] **to one another**’. Paul is not reinforcing social rank. He is writing to Christian communities in which ‘there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all’ (Colossians 3:11). He is asking us to respond to the inspiration of the Spirit of Christ and to model ourselves on Jesus, as Paul himself does: ‘Though I am free with respect to all, I have made myself a slave to all’ (1 Corinthians 9:19). This is what he asked of the Galatians: ‘Through love become slaves to one another’ (Galatians 5:13).

Ephesians 5:21

Be subject to one another out of reverence for the Messiah.

That this is what Paul has in mind is reinforced by his reference to Christ, for this is the command given us by Christ, and we are to carry it out in complete submission to his will, for he is our Lord. We are to have a sense of wonder and awe at the presence of Christ in all who are part of his body. This in turn is to lead us to a sharing in the humility of Christ, whereby we look up to others, subjecting our lives to serving them in love: ‘Owe no one anything, except to love one another’ (Romans 13:8).

Be subject to one another out of reverence for the Messiah.

That there is a lot more to this verse becomes apparent when we realise that it introduces a section in which Paul speaks of the Christian values that are to be lived in the home. We are socialised into 'traditional family values' from the first moments of our consciousness. These 'values' are basic to society. They are often unconscious and are most resistant to change. Yet the gospel must have something to say here. This brings up the perennial tension between 'inculturation' (the Christian life relating to the realities of the culture) and 'acculturation' (the Christian life being compromised by the habits, customs and 'values' of a society).

Be subject to one another out of reverence for the Messiah.

Paul himself lived in a society in which, in the public arena, husbands exercised authority over their wives, and in which domestic slavery was as taken for granted as is the relationship of employer and employee today. Though there is no indication that Paul had a blueprint in his mind of a different way of organising the home, we are left in no doubt of the central values that were to rule all relationships. In this context, what Paul is saying in this verse is, indeed, revolutionary, and if followed faithfully it could not but have a dramatic effect on marriage, family and slavery.

²¹being subject to one another out of reverence for the Messiah.

²²Wives, be subject to your husbands **as** you are to the Lord.

Paul's exhortation to wives in verse twenty-two can be found, almost word for word, in Colossians: 'wives, be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord' (Colossians 1:18).

It could appear, at first glance, to be simply an application of the general principle which he has stated in the previous verse. Since all Christians are to be '**subject to one another**', wives, for example, should look up to and reverence their husbands in everything, and give themselves in love in serving them.

Wives, be subject to your husbands **as** you are to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife just **as** the Messiah is the head of the church, the body of which he is the Saviour. Just **as** the church is subject to the Messiah, so also wives ought to be, in everything, to their husbands.

It is when we come to examine the reasons which Paul gives for his exhortation (not found in the parallel passage in Colossians), that we become aware that he is addressing a relationship, traditional in the communities to whom he is writing, in which authority is vested in the husband: ‘**the husband is the head of the wife**’. By contrast with the previous verse, the verb ‘be subject’ (ὑποτάσσω) is understood in such a way as to include its literal meaning whereby it refers to rank and social order as accepted in the society of his day.

Ephesians 5:22-24

Wives, be subject to your husbands **as** you are to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife just **as** the Messiah is the head of the church, the body of which he is the Saviour. Just **as** the church is subject to the Messiah, so also wives ought to be, in everything, to their husbands.

Is Paul, then, simply reinforcing the already given structure of authority? Is his purpose here to insist that wives recognise their lower position in the social order and behave accordingly?

Though Paul assumes the traditional structure, he is not insisting on it. His focus is elsewhere, as can be seen by his reference to the Messiah, and by his insertion of the key word **‘as’**.

Wives, be subject to your husbands **as** you are to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife just **as** the Messiah is the head of the church, the body of which he is the Saviour. Just **as** the church is subject to the Messiah, so also wives ought to be, in everything, to their husbands.

Assuming the authority of the husband, he is exhorting wives, when they live the reality of their position in the home, to do it in a certain way; namely, in the way in which they are subject to the Lord. In choosing to speak of Jesus as '**Lord**', Paul is already making a point. **Jesus and Jesus alone is their Lord**. The values that are to permeate their relationship with their husband are not the values of the world, but those of Jesus.

The whole letter prepares us to hear Paul say: ‘The Messiah is the head of the church, the body of which he is the Saviour.’

What does Paul intend when he says: ‘the husband is the head of the wife just as the Messiah is the head of the church’. We are pointing in the right direction if, once again, we focus on the word ‘as’. The Messiah is ‘head’ and he is faithful in love even to giving his life for the church (see 5:2). Since the husband is head, he should express his authority in the same way.

Similarly, the ‘as’ is important when Paul tells wives to be subject ‘as the church is subject to the Messiah’. We will have to await further clarification of Paul’s meaning, but this much is already clear: while Paul is not suggesting a change in the authority structure of the family, he is introducing a revolutionary principle that must radically alter it.

Ephesians 5:25

Husbands, love your wives, just **as** the Messiah loved the church and gave himself up for her

As noted in the commentary on the previous verses, Paul is not simply applying the general principle enunciated in verse twenty-one to various groups within the church. If he were he would tell husbands to be subject to their wives as they are to the Lord. He is assuming an order within marriage whereby authority lies with the husband, and he goes straight to the heart of the Christian life by telling husbands: ‘**love your wives, just as the Messiah loved the church and gave himself up for her**’. He prepared us for this when, speaking of husbands in their role as ‘head’, he spoke of Jesus the ‘head’ as being our ‘Saviour’ (5:23).

²⁵Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, ²⁶in order to make her holy by cleansing her with the washing of water by the word, ²⁷so as to present the church to himself in splendour, without a spot or wrinkle or anything of the kind — yes, so that she may be holy and without blemish.

When Paul goes on to describe how Jesus loved the church, he uses imagery from the ritual preparation of a bride for the nuptials. In his love Jesus prepares the church to be presented to him as a bride is prepared to be presented to the king.

Paul highlights the ‘washing of water’ and the ‘word’. The allusion is to baptism, and the word is the gospel itself, with special reference to the words that accompany baptism ‘in the name of the Lord’.

God has chosen all of us ‘in the Messiah ... to be holy and blameless before him in love’ (Ephesians 1:14). We have all been presented to him when ‘he raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus’ (Ephesians 2:6). What Paul wrote earlier about Jesus being our ‘Saviour’ (Ephesians 5:23), and what he says here about the church, applies equally to both bridegroom and bride.

In applying it to the bride is Paul simply reflecting the tradition which spoke of Israel as a bride (see Hosea 2:7; Isaiah 54:5), and in which it is the bridegroom who says: ‘You are altogether beautiful, my love; there is no flaw in you’ (Song of Solomon 4:7)

²⁸In the same way, husbands should love their wives as they do their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. ²⁹For no one ever hates his own flesh, but he nourishes and tenderly cares for it, just as the Messiah does for the church, ³⁰because we are members of his body. ³¹*‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.’*

Two aspects of this text are clear from a first reading. The first is that Paul is calling upon husbands, once again (see 5:22) to ‘**love their wives**’. The second is that he keeps the risen Messiah before our eyes throughout as the one who ‘**nourishes and tenderly cares for the church because we are members of his body**’. Other aspects of the text are not as easily comprehended.

Paul speaks of the wife as the 'body' of the husband. We must first recognise that he is drawing upon the narrative of Adam and Eve in the story of Genesis. Adam is alone in the garden of Eden. God declares: 'It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner' (Genesis 2:18). God goes on to make all the different living creatures and to present them to Adam 'but there was not found a helper as his partner' (Genesis 2:20). So God makes Eve, not by a separate act, but by taking already created flesh from Adam and forming it into Eve. When she is presented to Adam, he exclaims with joy: 'This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh' (Genesis 2:23). There follows the remark quoted by Paul in verse thirty-one: ³¹'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh' (Genesis 2:24).

Our first conclusion is that Paul speaks of the wife as the ‘body’ (and ‘flesh’) of the husband in order to recall the intimate communion intended by God the creator. There is already an implied critique of the dominion exercised by husbands over their wives, when we recall that this dominion is a result, not of God’s intention as creator, but of sin.

To the woman God said,

“I will greatly increase your pangs in childbearing;
in pain you shall bring forth children,
yet your desire shall be for your husband,
and he shall rule over you.” (Genesis 3:16).

³²This is a great mystery,

and I am applying it to the Messiah and the church.

It is in verse thirty-two that the thrust of Paul's exhortation finally becomes clear. Throughout the letter, Paul has been speaking of 'the mystery': namely, God's design to bring the whole of humanity into one body in a communion of love by uniting everyone to the Risen Jesus. He is presenting the communion in love between husband and wife 'in the Messiah' as a special witness to this mystery of communion that exists between the Risen Jesus and his body the church.

The traditional Latin version of the Bible (the 'Vulgate') translates the Greek *μυστήριον* here as '*sacramentum*'; hence our referring to marriage as a sacrament: an especially graced union that expresses the intimate love which Christ has for his church.

³³Each of you, however, should love his wife as himself,
and a wife should respect her husband.

Paul sums up his teaching by using traditional Jewish and Christian language to call on a husband to love his wife ‘**as himself**’ (see Galatians 5:14; Mark 12:31). His exhortation to a wife takes us back to his opening sentence: ‘**Be subject to one another out of reverence for the Messiah**’ (5:21).

Paul's logic

1. Eve from Adam's side - so the Church from Jesus' side
2. Christ's love for the Church (Baptism & Eucharist)
3. What does this show concerning husband-wife relationship?

Paul is working with cultural assumptions

The word 'as' introduces a revolutionary principle

Looking back over Paul's exhortation to wives and husbands, we see that his thought is moving in two directions. As is fitting in the context, and in line with the biblical tradition which speaks of God as a bridegroom and the people as a bride, Paul uses the imagery of marriage to describe the loving care which Jesus has towards his body, the church. He is the new Adam (see 1Cor 15:21-22; 15:45-49; Romans 5:12-21), the first-born from the dead, who, as the new 'Man', is the source of a new humanity (see 4:24). The Messiah is Adam and the church is Eve, his own body, the chosen object of his love, living in intimate communion of love with him. 'He loved the church and gave himself up for her' (5:25). He gave himself up to his executioners, making of his death a self-offering to us in love. He gave himself up to God, making of his dying an act of self-offering in obedient trust to his Father. He did this 'so that she may be holy' (5:26).

Christ wanted to draw the community of believers into the realm of the sacred, filling it with the Holy Spirit of God, and setting it aside as his beloved spouse (compare 1Corinthians 6:11; 2Corinthians 11:2-3). He ‘cleansed her with the washing of water by the word’ (5:26). Just as a bride is bathed prior to her nuptials, so the Church in baptism is cleansed, in order to enter into a new life with Christ, to be ‘raised up with him and seated with him in the heavenly places’ (2:6) The church is presented as the glorious spouse of Christ. Christ ‘nourishes and tenderly cares for her’ (5:29), filling the Church with his own divine fullness. He pours out his gifts upon the church.

Besides baptism, we think of the Eucharist (see 5:18-20), and the gift of the fullness of the Spirit (see 5:18).

Jesus is the ‘**saviour**’ (5:23) of the church, in all the ways we have just mentioned; he is also the ‘**head of the church, his body**’ (5:23). The church owes him obedience, for he is our ‘**Lord**’ (5:22). In brief, Paul takes the relationship between Adam and Eve, the archetype of the relationship between husband and wife, and uses it as an image to describe the relationship between Christ and the community that lives in communion with him.

The complementary movement in Paul's thought, and his primary focus in this section, is to reflect on what this intimacy between the Risen Jesus and the church means for the relationship between wives and husbands, and also to see how this relationship in turn enriches the life of the Christian community.

We have seen that the key to Paul's reflections is found by focusing on the central theme of the letter: what Paul continues to call 'the mystery'. Husbands and wives are to relate in such a way as to be a sacrament of God's design to call everyone into the 'one body', Christ's body.

Wives are to remember that the Risen Jesus is the one and only Lord, and, in being subject to their husbands, they are to witness to the values that inform the church in its relationship to him.

The husband's authority is to be one of love, of self-sacrifice, of a life given that his wife might be seen in her full glory. When Paul exhorts husbands to love their wives 'as **their own bodies**' (5:28), it emerges that he is reminding them that both they and their wives are one body because they belong to the body of the Messiah. Paul's reflections on the spousal love of the Risen Lord for the church challenge a Christian husband in a number of ways.

Firstly, he is included in the initial exhortation: ‘Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ’ (5:21). He is, therefore, to be subject to his wife out of reverence for Christ. At the deepest level of Christian identity, subordination is to be mutual.

Secondly, he must exercise his authority as ‘**head**’ in the way shown by Christ. Thirdly, he must see in his relationship to his wife a sacrament of Jesus’ relationship to her. Three times he is told to ‘**love**’ her (5:25,28,33), with the love with which Jesus loves her. Paul sees in the intimate communion of husband and wife an expression of the mystery that is revealed in the gospel. Their love is a sacrament of the kind of intimate love to which all are called, in which differences enrich but do not divide, nor are they exploited for power of one over another. While Paul does not directly criticise the institution of marriage as it existed in his time, his insistence on love and on the example of Jesus contain the power to revolutionise every social institution, including marriage.

In some cultures today, it is no longer assumed that the husband has authority over his wife. A man and a woman commit themselves together in love and as equals to a partnership in which they attempt to reach all decisions in mutual respect and love. When there is disagreement it is not at all assumed that the wife must submit to her husband's will. A way has to be found to live in unity, and compromises are found to be necessary. When consensus cannot be reached, sometimes one submits, sometimes the other. In such a situation it is no longer satisfactory to apply the principle in the way Paul does.

We have to go deeper to the fundamental principle of Christian baptism: ‘There is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus’ (Galatians 3:28). It is no longer satisfactory to compare the husband to Jesus and the wife to the church. The husband is Jesus for the wife, and the wife is Jesus for the husband, and both belong to the community that is loved by Jesus and in which his Spirit dwells.

Paul's basic insight still applies: marriage has been transformed by the fact that the union it expresses has reached its fulfilment in the Risen Jesus. Marriage is now a sacrament of this communion between Jesus and the Church, and so all the relationships that exist between a husband and wife are to be transformed, enlightened and enlivened by the presence of Jesus binding wife and husband together in love. When a husband loves his wife, Jesus is loving her. When a wife loves her husband, Jesus is loving him. When a husband obeys his wife, he is obeying Jesus; and when a wife obeys her husband, she is obeying Jesus.

When they thank each other, correct each other, or forgive each other, they are to do so 'in Jesus'. When they are 'subject to one another' (5:21) and discern in love the best way to act together in their married life, using all the spiritual means available to make their discernment, they are doing so, not because of an assumption that the husband commands and the wife obeys, but 'in Jesus', inspired by his love and guided by his Spirit.

Paul's basic insight still applies: marriage has been transformed by the fact that the union it expresses has reached its fulfilment in Christ.

n.1639

‘Authentic married love is caught up into divine love.’

Marriage is now a sacrament of this communion between Christ and the Church, and so all the relationships that exist between a husband and wife are to be transformed, enlightened and enlivened by the presence of Christ binding wife and husband together in love.

Their commitment of love is a sacrament also to others, witnessing to the unconditional love of God for all, that love-unto-death which Christ revealed on the cross.

n. 1615

‘The grace of Christian marriage is a fruit of Christ’s cross, the source of all Christian life.’

The couple, relying on God's grace, are committing themselves to be witnesses to the community of the fidelity of divine love. They are also an example to others of the importance of giving up one's own self-serving ego in order to be sensitive to the needs and desires of another person.

n. 1609

‘Marriage helps to overcome self-absorption, egoism, pursuit of one's own pleasure. It helps to open oneself to the other, to mutual aid and to the gift of self.’

This is of special importance for any children they may have. It is their mutual, sacramental love which will provide the sacred garden in which the children are to be nurtured. It will be the children's basic experience of fidelity and of the creative self-giving of God. It is important for the Church community. It is important for the Church's mission to the world.

Their consecrated love is the existential foundation for a life of generativity and creativity: in their own relationship; in the overflowing of this love in the building of a family and a home; and in their growing ability to contribute to the community in building an environment of love.

Commitment to the sacrament of marriage is a commitment to love. It is a commitment to love **as Jesus loves**, with the communion of love which he has with the Father. The commitment of the couple to each other is sustained by the prior commitment of God to them. The risen Christ commits himself to pour out the Spirit of his love on the couple, so that they will not only experience joy, but that **‘your joy may be complete’** (John 16:24).

Kahlil Gibran

You were born together, and together you shall be for ever more.
You shall be together when the white wings of death scatter your days.
Yes, you shall be together in the silent memory of God.
But let there be spaces in your togetherness,
 and let the winds of the heavens dance between you.
Love one another, but make not a bond of love:
 let it rather be a moving sea between the shores of your souls.
Fill each other's cup, but drink not from one cup.
Give one another of your bread but eat not from the same loaf.
Sing and dance together and be joyous, but let each one of you be alone,
 even as the strings of a lute are alone
 though they quiver with the same music.
Give your hearts, but not into each other's keeping,
 for only the hand of Life can contain your hearts.
And stand together yet not too near together:
 for the pillars of the temple stand apart,
 and the oak tree and the cypress grow not in each other's shadow.

It is no small matter to enter into marriage. To promise to be there for someone for ever and to hear that other person make the same promise meets a profound human need and longing. It puts a seal of deep trust on a love between two people that dares to set out on a life-journey together.

A person who has made such a commitment knows that he or she is promising to do all that is possible to keep that promise, 'through good times and bad, in sickness or in health.' They want to keep it, and their desire is supported by the image of Jesus, the faithful bridegroom of the Church, and the knowledge that the sacrament is supported by the faith-community of the Church and a guarantee of grace.

The nature of the trust placed by spouses in each other and the importance of marital fidelity to society, especially to the children born of the marriage, all highlight the importance of the spouses doing all that they can to keep this promise.

John-Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio* n. 20

‘Christ renews the first plan that the Creator inscribed in the hearts of man and woman, and in the celebration of the sacrament of matrimony offers a new heart.

Thus the couples are not only able to overcome hardness of heart, but also and above all they are able to share the full and definitive love of Christ, the new and eternal covenant made flesh. Just as the Lord Jesus is the faithful witness, the yes of the promises of God and thus the supreme realisation of the unconditional faithfulness with which God loves his people, so Christian couples are called to participate truly in the irrevocable indissolubility that binds Christ to the Church his bride, loved by him to the end.’

‘Just as of old God encountered his people with a covenant of love and fidelity, our Saviour, the Spouse of the Church, encounters Christian spouses through the sacrament of Matrimony. Christ dwells with them, gives them the strength to take up their crosses and follow him, to rise again after they have fallen, to forgive one another, to bear one another’s burdens and to love one another with supernatural, tender and fruitful love. In the joys of their love and family life he gives them here on earth a foretaste of the wedding feast of the Lamb.’

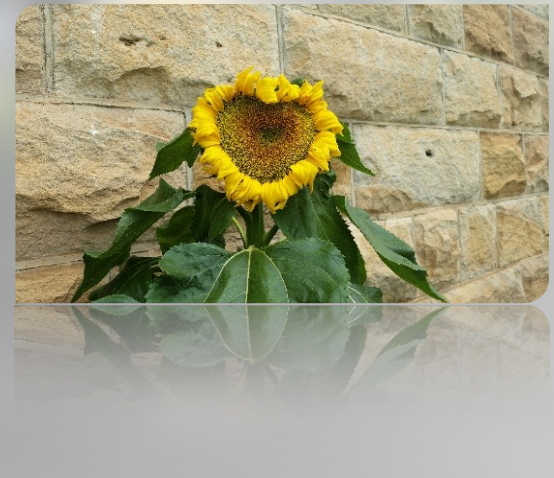
Those of us who are unmarried do not, of course, share directly in the sacrament. However, we are surrounded by those who do, and so the grace comes to us indirectly.

n. 1658

‘No one is without a family in this world. The Church is a home and family for everyone, especially for those who labour and are heavily burdened

Each of us has a place in the heart of Jesus, the bridegroom. Each of us has a place at the wedding banquet of the Eucharist, and each of us longs for the fullness of covenant love in the eternal mystery of heaven. The sacrament of matrimony is a symbol of this love to the Church and to the world.

There is a place



Music by Beth Pederson & Cinde Borup. Sung by Rita French