

IMAGES OF THE CHURCH V: CHURCH AS BRIDE OF CHRIST

Though just shy of my fourth birthday, I somehow managed to get in the last word. Our entire family had been invited to a wedding—well, almost all of us! My parents (ahem...mom) thought I was **too young** to appreciate it. Perhaps I was a handful? Instead, our wonderful babysitter took me to a concert, perhaps my first ever. **Arthur Fiedler** conducted the famed “Boston Pops” on a nationwide tour. Not only did I attend, she somehow managed to get me **backstage**, where I met the famed conductor. I remember nothing of the concert, but **I do remember** meeting him. I would have plenty of opportunities at other weddings, including those of my older cousins and carry great memories of those celebrations. Weddings are **peak moments of joy** in the family of the Church and as a priest, I truly enjoy celebrating them as much as I did when a new priest. But I still tell all grooms a hard truth—above all, wedding days **belong to brides**, much more so than even the Groom. That’s the way it is, and it isn’t changing anytime soon!

In speaking of the Church as the **Bride of Christ**, we begin by noting several Old Testament images of the Lord in which God always presented himself as a **bridegroom** to his bride, **Israel**. This nuptial imagery predates the Christian era and shows the **closeness of God** to his people. Thus, it is no stretch to see how early Christians interpreted the closeness between Jesus Christ and the community of believers he founded, known as the Church. The imagery begins in the Garden, where we see that the **two become one** in the union of Adam and Eve. Formed from the side of Adam, Eve emerges as the perfect companion, the necessary completion for each to become whole. Imagery rapidly developed whereby the Church is similarly united to Christ. One cannot understand Christ without reference to His church and visa-versa.

One early Church document reveals evidence that marriages were blessed by the Church. In a 207 A.D. letter to his wife (*Ad uxorem*, 2,8) **Tertullian** shares that if two believers marry, “the church unites them, the oblation confirms the marriage, the blessing seals it.” One cannot conclude that this blessing was mandatory, as sacraments understandably developed over time. Ancient Roman representations of marriage (e.g. burial sarcophagi) depict couples **joining** their **right hands** (the *dextrarum iunctio*), in what is believed to be the scene that figuratively represents their union. Some ancient basilicas show wedding scenes, sometimes with the father of the bride joining the couple in marriage. Still today, the Rite calls for couples to join their **right hands** when exchanging vows, though most prefer to join both of their hands, as it looks more natural.

Nor is Scripture silent about this image, clearly alluding to it. The Letter to the **Ephesians** (5:25-26, 32) comes to mind: “Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and handed himself over for her, to sanctify her... This is a great mystery, but I speak in reference to Christ and the church.” While the exact phrase “bride of Christ” is not **explicitly** used in Scripture, the concept is certainly present. In this image, the husband has a leadership role within marriage, though it is put forward as a covenantal love of total self-giving for the sake of his spouse. The husband here is Jesus Christ. Sometimes even Catholics are confused in their ecclesiology. Q: “Who is the **head** of the Church,” you may be asked? A: The pope. No offense to Pope Francis, but... **wrong!** A: Christ is head of the Church.

Our Catechism elaborates: “Three aspects of the Church as the Body of Christ are to be more specifically noted: the unity of all her members with each other as a result of their union with Christ; Christ as head of the Body; and the Church as bride of Christ.” (CCC§ 789) In a Wednesday General Audiences in 2009, Pope Benedict XVI beautifully summarized this **headship of Christ**: “...the Church recognizes that Christ is greater than she is, given that his lordship extends beyond her confines, and to the extent that the Church alone not the cosmos is described as the Body of Christ.” He stressed that the **original reference** point of the Ephesians reading is unclear. Thus, was it the Church-Christ relationship in whose light we can see human marriage, or was it the experience of the intimate union of husband and wife that is **mirrored** in the Church? The ambiguity allows for a reciprocal understanding—each informs the other.

The imagery of marriage for the church is also appropriate because even the beauty of marriage needs to be **nurtured daily** with prayer and **sacrificial** love. No married couple experiences marital bliss every day, just as no one in the Church experiences Easter Sunday joy every day either! Vocations are hard work; marriages need

God's grace to be successful. If the Church is truly to be like a Bride, then we must work at the relationship and keep our part of the covenant. We seek to remain **equally committed** when we are tired or disillusioned just as much as when we feel deeply moved in the aftermath of a powerful experience of reconciliation at a retreat, a beautiful Holy Week liturgy or faith-filled wedding. We're in it for the long haul—we're in it for life!

- **Clueless** in Melbourne. Due to Covid-19, the Australian government has banned the administration of the sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick. They have decreed that "last rites ... can be provided using video or livestreaming." Seriously? Anointing by video? Sadly, this **brehtaking** lack of understanding of the sacrament (including its name) is not surprising. Thankfully, some priests are defying the order.
- While the **2500th** anniversary of the Battle of **Thermopylae** (Sept. 480 BC) passed quietly, the course of world history might have unfolded quite differently without its lessons. While the **vastly outnumbered** Spartans and Greeks still lost the skirmish, it proved that the **Persians** were not invincible. The morale booster paved the way for a later **definitive Greek victory**. I wonder...what if the Persians **had** won, with their **authoritarian monarchy**? What if great western ideals such as **democracy** and **freedom** had not taken hold? Hmmn...
- With the input of the Parish Council, we are carefully **considering options** to return the distribution of Holy Communion to its usual place within Mass. We may begin first at daily Masses while considering adjustments to the Sunday dismissal, providing an orderly exit.
- Loras College (Dubuque, IA) is temporarily removing the statue of its founder, **Bishop Mathias Loras**. New revelations emerged that while a missionary priest in Alabama, Loras owned slaves. He founded a Catholic college (Spring Hill) in Mobile, that exists to this day. The **pioneer** bishop served in Dubuque for twenty years beginning in 1837 and was **friends** with Bishop Joseph Cretin, our first bishop. Much of the new Diocese of Saint Paul (1851) was taken from Dubuque's territory. **Historical context** is crucial when evaluating the character of a man who lived 175 years ago.
- The increased use of EFT (Electronic Funds Transfer) has been crucial in maintaining our **financial stability** during this pandemic. It provides a regular stream of **stewardship support**, whether or not you are able to attend in person. I am deeply grateful.

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John L. Ubel,
Rector



Detail from a Roman Sarcophagus
"the handclasp of Marriage"
(British Museum)