Homily for 21st Sunday, 2015  
August 23, 2015  
Readings: Joshua 24:1-18, Ps 34, Eph. 5:21-32, Jn. 6:60-69  
Place: Alumni Chapel, 10 am  
Theme: Sacrament of marriage is a partnership in Christ and with each other  
Mood: Fair-mindedness  

A few years ago, I served as pastor of a Vincentian parish in Maryland. One 80 year-old priest there possessed a very sharp mind and wit. By personality he was an instigator, an itch. Daily, many of the six priests and six parish staff, most of whom were women, would gather for lunch. This senior priest, every so often, “innocently” would introduce into conversation St. Paul’s words from this morning’s second reading, “women, be submissive to your husbands.” He would drop this bomb, watch the smoke come out of the women’s ears, and two minutes later, would excuse himself from the table. As he left, he would wink at me, knowing that he intentionally had ignited a storm of agitated feelings and comment.  

What amazes me about this phrase from Ephesians is that almost nobody quotes the very next sentence, “husbands, love your wives as Christ loved his bride, his Church.” A few thoughts,  

- Submissive does not mean subordinate. Submissive means “yielding, humble, docile.” It does not mean second class. All Christian men and women are to be submissive to God’s will; being submissive, respectful, and appropriately yielding at times is a virtue.  
- In the New American Bible, St. Paul’s instruction to women consists of exactly 50 words. The paragraph addressed to husbands has exactly 100 words! The instruction to men is twice as long as the exhortation to women.  
- The paragraph to husbands contains marvelous motivations:  
  1. Husbands, love your wives as Christ loved his church. Christ gave up his life for her.  
  2. Husbands, love your wives as you love your own bodies. No one hates his own body; he nourishes it and takes care of it.  

Some few personal observations about marriage,  

- Marriage is a partnership. The Nuptial Blessing, prayed publicly at every Catholic wedding, includes this instruction for the husband, “know that your wife is your equal.” Partnership requires each person to pitch in and do his/her share according to one’s interests and abilities. Each couple works out their partnership in a unique way.  
- Advice to young people. Before people marry, their first moral responsibility is to their parents. When people marry, their first moral responsibility shifts to their spouse. When children come along, the couple’s first moral responsibility ... remains with their spouse ... except when some emergency occurs, then the primary responsibility momentarily shifts to the person in greatest need. Young couples, please develop your relationship so that when the children are grown and leave the home, you and your spouse have grown together.
In the Catholic sacrament of marriage, two people walk into church: the bride and the groom. At the end of the ceremony, three people leave: the husband and the wife joined in Jesus Christ. Jesus’ divine life and love penetrate and permeate our individual selves so that we might live more thoroughly in, for and through Jesus Christ.

St. Paul concludes today’s reading with these words, “[Marriage] is a great mystery.” We Americans understand “mystery” as something that we don’t understand. Theologians understand the original Greek word “mysterion” as a reality that is so rich in meaning that we can never grasp it completely. Its meaning keeps unfolding as we keep living. Christ’s love for his Church is ever ancient and ever new; it keeps unfolding for every new place and time. Marriage too remains a mystery; it keeps unfolding in its reality and its meaning. Mystery abounds in all relationships. And Christ’s selfless loving way serves as the model for all relationships, including marriage.