

**27th Sunday--Cycle B (2015)**  
(Gen 2:18-24; Heb 9-11; Mark 10:2-16)

Today's first reading on the creation of Eve is chosen to go with today's gospel, i.e., Jesus' words on divorce, but mostly we'll be speaking of what it says about the nature of woman.

We begin by noting God's concern: "It is not good for the man to be alone." The lectionary has God providing a "partner" for him. The older translation had "helper"; this was considered demeaning, but properly understood, nothing could be farther from the truth. The Hebrew word actually does mean "help" and most often it stands for a help that comes only from God. Almost every reference to "help" in the psalms uses the same word, but with reference to God. These include: the one we use for the opening of the Divine Office: "God, come to my assistance; Lord, make haste to help me" (Ps 70:2) "Our help is the name of the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth" (124:8); "I raise my eyes toward the mountains. From where will come my help? My help comes from the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth" (124:8). I could go on, but it would make my homily too long..

In producing this "help," God first creates the animals, but though they come from the earth, just as Adam, none of them are suitable. A very special creation is needed. Why make her from part of Adam's body? To show they are equal, of the same nature. Why from his rib? St.

Bernardino has a beautiful commentary: "God did not make a woman out of a bone of Adam's foot, so that he should tread her underground, nor out of a bone of his head, so that she should dominate him; but he made her out of his rib, which is close to his heart, to teach him to love her truly, as his companion."

So the first couple begin as equals, but history shows that that society developed into a patriarchal culture. In this culture a man might take additional wives and concubines. We think of Abraham and Sarah, but there was also Hagar. And of course Jacob had Leah and Sarah as wives, but also two concubines. This was a far cry from the original ideal of "the two becoming one flesh." Women were subject to their fathers or, if married, to their husbands. The punishment for idolatry was death, but a man committed adultery only if he infringed the rights of another man. A widow did not inherit property from her husband. If she were childless, she could be left destitute, a prey to the unscrupulous. A man could divorce a woman, but not the other way around. The grounds for divorce given in the OT, namely, "something indecent," were so vague that one school of rabbis allowed it for almost any reason, e.g., a burnt omelet. That is what prompts the question in today's gospel, "Can a man divorce his wife for ANY reason?" Jesus already makes things better by forbidding divorce.

We know that even today in Near Eastern countries, esp. where Sharia is imposed, women have to be veiled and covered from head to foot, cannot drive a car, are not allowed to be educated. I see this as fear of women gaining

equal status. (Even in the States, we were slow to grant women's suffrage.)

The advent of Christianity helped improve this somewhat. Jesus allowed women a share in His ministry, at least in the sense that "the women from Galilee" traveled with Him and the apostles and helped pay their way. He never named them apostles, though that may have been because women could not easily travel alone, would not be accepted as preachers, rather than for any other reason. These women stayed with Him in His passion, while the apostles fled. After His resurrection He appeared first to Mary Magdalen and made her, in effect, an apostle to the apostles.

Paul has a lot to say about women. He starts out very well. In Galatians, the earliest of his "great" epistles, he says, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free person, there is not male and female; for we are all one in Christ Jesus" (3:28). This suggests equality. Elsewhere Paul is not so kind. We are all familiar with, "Wives should be subordinate to their husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of his wife just as Christ is head of the church" (Eph 5:22-23). "Women should keep silent in the churches .... But if they want to learn anything, they should ask their husbands at home. For it is improper for a woman to speak in the church" (1 Cor 14:34-35). "I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man. She must be quiet" (1 Tim 2:12).

Paul has problems when he tries to argue that a

woman should not pray with head uncovered. He gives a whole series of reasons: "Any woman who prays ... with her head unveiled brings shame upon her head, for it is one and the same thing as if she had had her head shaved. For if a woman does not have her head veiled, she may as well have her hair cut off" (1 Cor 11:5-6). Why does that follow? "If a man wears his hair long it is a disgrace to him, whereas if a woman has long hair it is her glory" (1 Cor 11:14-15). Again, she should be veiled, he says, "because of the angels" (v. 10). Who knows what that means? Feeling he hasn't made the case, he is reduced to: "Judge for yourselves: is it proper ...?" (v. 13). Lamely, he ends: "we do not have such a custom, nor do the churches of God" (v. 16)

That's how it was in the early Church, at least Paul's church. How is it now? Let's take a quick survey. Look around: how many women in veils do you see? In hats? With shaved heads? The lectionary no longer requires that we read about wives being subject to husbands. Women not only speak in church but also read the Scriptures, and for long they have been ministers of the Eucharist. The Church now allows girls to serve at the altar. Women take part in parish councils. Why is the Church reluctant to go further?

It is well known that the early Church had women deacons. A 1995 study of the Canon Law Society of America concluded: "Women have been ordained permanent deacons in the past, and it would be possible for the Church to do so again." This was in 1995, but in 20

years, nothing has been done. There is a reluctance to return to that practice, however useful it might be for the Church today. As for the priesthood, we are discouraged even from discussing that. Yet there are a dozen organizations throughout the world working for the ordination of women, and not a few bishops have called for it. In Ireland (of all places!) the Association of Catholic Priests stated that the Church must ordain women in order to survive. In 1976 the Pontifical Biblical Commission stated that the NT alone does not settle the matter once and for all. In 1979 a Task Force of the Catholic Biblical Association was less ambiguous; after a study covering many years, it stated: "The conclusion we draw, then, is that the NT evidence, while not decisive by itself, points toward the admission of women in priestly ministry." I may be wrong, but I seem to sense a widespread shift among Catholics on this question of women priests.

Recently Pope Francis said "That door is closed." But will that end the discussion? I know some will condemn me for even suggesting the Church might change its position on this, though it has never been infallibly settled. But if we are truly Catholic believers, we will remember that Jesus said to His apostles, "Behold I am with you even to the end of the world." If we remember that the Holy Spirit is the soul of the Church and guarantees it will not go astray, then we can look to the future with perfect confidence, whatever it brings.

By all means let us not be guilty of the lack of faith displayed in the hand-wringing article in the latest issue of

the *National Catholic Register*, which offers a “guide for survival” for the upcoming synod on family life. It confesses a “sense of anxiety and powerlessness” about it. The author speaks of people relapsing into “clinical depression” because of news coming from the synod held two years ago. For this new one he speaks of pressure groups looking to change the divine law, and of “many priests and bishops betraying the faith.” “Survive” a synod? My God, where should we expect the faith to be safe, if not in a gathering of cardinals and bishops under the guidance of the Pope? Let us believe the Holy Spirit has been behind improving the lot of women in the Church; also in the way Pope Francis is leading us. And let us pray that the Holy Spirit will be active in our own lives, as He is in the Church, with true faith and an active love.