

STATIO CONFERENCE

THE CHURCH: “A MOTHER WHO HAS AT HEART THE GOOD OF HER CHILDREN”

By Sister Adelaida Ygrubay, OSB

INTRODUCTION

Pope Francis just left the country, and we are all still euphoric at the experience of seeing him and hearing his message up close. For me, those days of the Papal visit was an eye-opener of sorts, for I have been pondering for some time how to write of the Church as Mother (as assigned to me by the editor of the *Conversatio*). My early reaction upon learning my assignment was that I might not be the best choice to write on this topic. My own mother was very sick when I was 5 years old, and died when I was 7, so I practically grew up with my father. What *could* I say, I thought, of mothers – or of being a mother? Luckily for me, I had a father who had the compassionate heart of a mother. And this compassionate heart was definitely evident in Pope Francis as he commiserated with the victims of Typhoon Haiyan in Tacloban, as he quietly listened to the stories of streetchildren, and as he bowed in silent prayer, and asked the crowd to pray for Kristel Mae Padasas, the young woman who died after she was hit by a scaffolding after the Papal Mass in Tacloban. I realized that the Church’s “motherhood” goes beyond gender or race, that it is rather a reflection of God’s own “motherhood.”

THE CHURCH AS “MOTHER”

The title of this statio conference comes from a catecheses of Pope Francis in one of his weekly audiences. He says that:

... we do not become a Christian on our own, but by being born and nurtured in the faith in the midst of the People of God, that is the Church. She is a true mother who gives us life in Christ and, in the communion of the Holy Spirit, brings us into a common life with our brothers and sisters.

In another occasion, Pope Francis mentions that the image of the Church as “Mother” is one that the Vatican Council uses to help us understand the Church:

the Church is our Mother in the faith, in the supernatural life (cf. Dogmatic Constitution Lumen Gentium, 6.14.15.41.42).

He mentions that this image is one of the images most used by the Fathers of the Church in the first centuries. As early as the 3rd century AD, Cyprian of Carthage wrote: “*You cannot have God as your Father unless you have the Church for your Mother.*” The point here is that Christ has given the world a “mother” to nurture, teach, love and instruct us in the faith.

THE CHURCH AS WOMAN/MOTHER IN THE BIBLE

There is enough evidence in the Old Testament of God using the image of woman or mother to describe his relationship of love or tenderness or comfort towards his people or “Israel” or “Jerusalem.” Later on, when Christ has given us the Church as his gift of love, the image of Church as woman/mother to describe this Church came to the fore:

- The scriptures has many passages that describe God as a woman to describe his tenderness, faithfulness and nurturing love towards his people:
 - **Hosea 11:3-4 God as mother** - *Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk, I who took them up in my arms; but they did not know that I healed them. I led them with cords of human kindness, with bands of love. I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks. I bent down to them and fed them.*
 - **Isaiah 49:15 God is like a nursing mother** - *Can a woman forget her sucking child ... even if she forgets, I will never forsake you.*
 - **Isaiah 42:14 God as a woman in labor** - *“For a long time I have held my peace, I have kept myself still and restrained myself; now I will cry out like a woman in labor, I will gasp and pant.”*
 - **Isaiah 66:12-13 God as a comforting mother** - *For thus says the LORD: “Behold, I will extend peace to her like a river, and the glory of the nations like an overflowing stream; and you shall nurse, you shall be carried upon her hip, and bounced upon her*

knees. As one whom his mother comforts, so I will comfort you; you shall be comforted in Jerusalem.”

- **Deuteronomy 32:11-12 God is described as a mother eagle -**
“Like the eagle that stirs up its nest, and hovers over its young, God spreads wings to catch you, and carries you on pinions.”
- **Psalm 131:2 God as a Mother -**
“But I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a weaned child with its mother; my soul is like the weaned child that is with me.”
- In the Gospels, Jesus himself uses the image of a mother hen protecting her young: **Matthew 23:37 Luke 13:34** *“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not!*
- In **Galatians 4:19-31**, St. Paul uses the image of childbirth to describe his *“anguish until Christ is formed in you!”* to make the Galatians aware of their inheritance. He uses the image of the “sons of the free woman” and the “sons of the slave” to distinguish between the “two covenants,” pointing out that only the children of the free woman will inherit the promise and that brings with it a great dignity as well as a responsibility.
- **Ephesians 5: 21-32** uses the image of the relationship between Christ and the Church as a model for the relationship of a wife to her husband: *the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the Church (v. 23); Husbands, love your wives as Christ loves his Church and gave himself up for her (v. 25)*, and so on.

It is this explicit mention of the Church as the Bride of Christ that influenced the historical understanding of the Church as our “mother.” However, as we can see above, there is a long tradition of using feminine images (of mother, childbirth, etc.) to describe God’s love for his people. Pope Francis draws on this scriptural foundation when he speaks of the Church as “mother.” And when he does that, he takes in all the richness of meaning that the word “mother” connotes: life-giving, nurture, tenderness, patience, endurance, self-sacrifice; it also means one who gives direction, who teaches and leads.

THE CHURCH AS MOTHER according to Pope Francis

- The Church is mother of all and is fruitful: the Church is “home of all” and

not a small chapel that allows in only a select few. Its ministers must be people who are capable of giving spiritual life. He says: *We must not reduce the bosom of the universal Church to a nest protecting our mediocrity.* It is not enough that one is in the Church (or in religious life, for that matter). One must bear fruit, as our Mother, the Church does

- The Church not only keeps the doors open but is also one that takes risks, that “steps out of itself” into even un-trodden paths to find the lost, the indifferent, those who do not care.
- Its ministers are:
 - Merciful: they *take responsibility for the people and accompany them like the good Samaritan, who washes, cleans and raises up his neighbor.*
 - Compassionate: They are those who *can warm the hearts of the people, who walk through the dark night with them, who know how to dialogue and to descend themselves into their people’s night, into the darkness, but without getting lost.*

CONCLUSION:

The words of Pope Francis are not new. He himself says that these ideals that he espouses is “pure gospel.” What is “new” is the way he says it, in a simple, down-to-earth way that many understand and see. All of a sudden, we realize that mercy and compassion are not just ideals that we keep in a cabinet like trophies or precious china that we take out and polish every now and then to make us feel good, but they are qualities that are desirable - qualities that we can have and can live out in the reality of our lives. Pope Francis says the first step towards being the kind of Church he envisions is to change our attitudes: *We have to recapture that tenderness, including maternal tenderness We should involve the heart.* For without this maternal tenderness and without involving the heart, we may end up as mere managers and not children and heirs of God’s Church.

Guide for reflection:

1. Reflect on the images in the scripture passages mentioned above. Allow the words and images to speak to your heart.
 - a. How do the images move you?
 - b. What movements do you sense in your heart?
 - c. Where do the movements lead you?

2. What changes need to happen in me, and in my life, so that I can be the merciful and compassionate minister that the Church, our Mother, deserves?