

Homily for July 2nd and 3rd 2022
14th Sunday Ordinary Time

The Tender Maternal Heart

Without mothers none of us would be here. They cooperate in generating life, and give birth to us. They nurture us physically, intellectually, emotionally and spiritually. Mothers have a central role in guiding us in our development towards maturity and adulthood.

The biblical writer, Isaiah uses the image of motherhood to convey the way God cares for us. In a most beautiful verse we read:

"Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you!"

Of course the answer to this question is “no”, a mother will not forget the child at her breast. But even if she was to do the unimaginable, show no care and compassion toward her offspring, God will not forget us. The verse following upon this one reads:

See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands

Isaiah is the prophet of the tender maternal heart. Imagine what it would be like to engrave the names of your children upon the palms of your hands. There would be a pain associated with having the names of your beloved ones so close to your heart. This says the Lord, is how close we are to him. An while mothers do not engrave their children’s names literally on their palms there is a maternal tenderness of suffering known to mothers, that is emotionally painful and intimate.

This maternal imagery comes to full flower in the last chapter of Isaiah. It is from the 66th chapter of Isaiah that today’s passage is found. God’s maternal love is expressed in the most vivid prose. Listen again to part of today’s reading from a different translation than the one read a few minutes ago.

***“Rejoice, Jerusalem,
and all who love her, celebrate!
join in the happy singing.
You newborns can satisfy yourselves
at her nurturing breasts.
Yes, delight yourselves and drink your fill
at her ample bosom.”***

In this passage, Jerusalem is the city that represents God’s maternal care. Here God is depicted as this most generous mother whose milk nurtures and fully satisfies her young. Then there are these words depicting God’s delight in God’s beloved offspring:

*You'll nurse at her breasts,
nestle in her bosom,
and be bounced on her knees.*

Do you hear in these words the care and delight of the Lord? There is the nurturing breast and the playful knee where we can envision that well fed and contented child full of laughter as the little one is celebrated and gleefully gurgles and giggles. Then these words that speak of the comfort of God that is like a mother's care.

*As a mother comforts her child,
So, I'll comfort you.¹*

One of the ways in which these words from Isaiah have been interpreted is to apply them to celebrating that the Church is our Mother. In a document from Vatican II, the special Church Council that happened in a series of sessions from 1962-1965 are these words:

Because the disciples must always offer an imitation of and a testimony to the charity and humility of Christ, Mother Church rejoices at finding within her bosom men and women who very closely follow their Saviour (Lumen Gentium 45)

So I would like to think with you about Mother Church's maternal embrace.

First of all just as a mother generates life, so too does the Church through our baptism. Just as water is essential to our physical birth, so the same holds true for our spiritual birth in baptism. In Rome the Cathedral Church of the Bishop of Rome is called St. John Lateran. Next to the Cathedral is a special building called the Baptistery, the place where people are baptized if this happens in the precincts of the Cathedral. In the Baptistery are these words:

"Here is born a people of divine lineage, generated by the Holy Spirit who makes these waters life-giving; Mother Church gives birth to her children within these waves".

Pope Francis in reflecting on our spiritual birth as expressed in the Lateran inscription stated in 2013:

A Christian is not an island! We do not become Christians in a laboratory, we do not become Christians alone and by our own effort, since the faith is a gift, it is a gift from God given to us in the Church and through the Church. And the Church gives us the life of faith in Baptism: that is the moment in which she gives birth to us as children of God, the moment she gives us the life of God, she engenders us as a mother would.

This makes us understand something important: our taking part in the Church is not an exterior or formal fact, it is not filling out a form they give us; it is an interior and vital act;

¹ Pet https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2013/documents/papa-francesco_20130911_udienza-generale.htmlerson, E. H. (2005). [*The Message: the Bible in contemporary language*](#) (Is 66:10–13). NavPress.

one does not belong to the Church as one belongs to a society, to a party or to any other organization. The bond is vital, like the bond you have with your mother, because, as St Augustine says, “The Church is truly the mother of Christians”²

Not only is the Church our mother because she generates life, she also is our mother because she sustains us and encourages us to mature in our spiritual life. Think about it this way, a mother will ask more of a six year old than a 2 year old, and will expect more of the child as they continue to mature. The same thing is true for our spiritual growth and maturation.

In today’s Gospel Jesus says that the harvest is plentiful but the labourers are few..... by this he means that there are so many who do not know the maternal tender love of God, and we are called, as we mature as members of the family of God – Mother Church, to extend signs and expression of that love to others.

St Mother Theresa of Kolkata was once speaking with a young man who wanted to do something for Christ. He was saddened by the problems he saw in the world, and expressed his frustration to Mother Teresa. He told her, "I'm only one person, and the world is in such a mess! What can I do?" She answered, "Pick up a broom."

Spoken like a true mother.

We are to discover in our own lives that to share in the life of Mother Church means that we want to be those who long for more people to come under her loving and maternal care. We want to pick up our brooms.

This is why in the Gospel reading Jesus sends 70 out ahead of him to prepare the way for his coming. The number is symbolic for the nations of the world. We know this because in Genesis 11 there is a genealogy of Noah’s descendants – it totals 70 names; names that represent all the nations. In sending out the 70 Jesus is declaring that the witness of God’s maternal love is to be shared among all people.

This means that the Church can only live her maternal life when we participate in this life. Jesus will not do it without us.

Again to quote Pope Francis:

I love a Church that is not closed in herself, but capable of coming out, of moving, even with risks, to bring Christ to all people, I am thinking of everyone, of me, of you, of every Christian! We all take part in the motherhood of the church, so that the light of Christ may reach the far confines of the earth.³

To be the Church is to experience her maternal care and be those who extend her care to others. For God delights in us as a mother nestles her baby at her breast, bounces the child on her knee and provides that maternal comfort and care.

² Ibid

³ Ibid