
The Waters of the Womb: Towards a Theology of Maternal Priesthood

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Eight years nursing experience in the ICU did not justify my intervention in the maternity ward. An inadequate ecclesiology led to my involvement:

My co-workers in labor and delivery, knowing my religious affiliation as a divinity student, contacted me in the ICU and asked me to come. Upon entering the delivery room, I found a tearful young mother cradling her newborn, blue baby against her breast. A distance from the bed stood an awkward young man in a clerical collar, his face pale and tense. She wanted her stillborn baby baptized; his ecclesiology paralyzed him into impotence. He mumbled something about the function of infant baptism, and explained that the child was in no need. He stood helplessly and feebly attempting to offer comfort through his words. She sobbed audibly.¹

It is within instances such as this, that the inadequacy of maintaining “correct” theology and ecclesiology become apparent. The young cleric, conscious of traditional “uses” of baptism, was impotent in meeting the spiritual and emotional needs of this grieving woman. By making the dead infant the centre of the request for baptism, the clergyman robbed the situation of grace. This request for baptism was for the mother, as the child was perceived by the priest to be already within the bonds of grace and divine love. The potential recipient of healing, restorative grace was the woman who had laboured in love for her dead child, and the community who mourned with her. While the cleric seemed cold, or perhaps ill prepared, or awkward in his decisions,

the question still remains: was the pastor appropriate in his refusal to baptize this child? How does one usher a stillborn child into the community of faith? Is it necessary? Is there a constructive or pastoral theology that can lend support to the mother's request? Through a feminist lens a theology of maternal priesthood will demonstrate a possible *graceful* response.

A central question in this narrative is the nature of baptism and its application to infants. While much discussion has taken place over the appropriateness of *infant* versus *believer's baptism*, for sake of brevity, I will assume a normative role for infant baptism and simply state for clarification, the theological themes at the core of the sacrament. Vital to the understanding of infant baptism is the doctrine of prevenient grace, and subsequently the notion of the *imago Dei*. Central to Wesleyan theology² (Dunning 1988, 49), prevenient grace is "the grace that goes before" (Dunning 1988, 158)—meaning the relationship of humanity to the Creator who extends towards the creation in love. Prevenient grace is that which enables us to respond to the divine; it is an expression of filial love. Barth rejects any notion of *analogia entis* (analogy of being) by which natural qualities were ascribed to humans, and instead insists upon an *analogia relationis* (analogy of relation) (Barth 1957, 3.2.220.ff). Relationship (to God and in turn to each other) is an ontological concept that determines the essential nature of what it means to be human: "When prevenient grace is interpreted as an ontological principal, it is grace that constitutes the humanity of man [sic]. The very being of man *qua* man [sic] is in his essential standing in grace. This clearly retains the Creator-creature relationship with all that that entails" (Dunning 1988, 160). Therefore, prevenient grace must be spoken of in relational terms only, not as an essential quality that exists innately within.

The *imago Dei*, then, can also only be spoken of in terms of relationship. Dunning depicts this as a God-given ability to mirror God's image. It is not the mirror, however, that is the image. God's image is *in* the mirror: "When we stand in front of the mirror, in proper relation to it, our image is reflected therein. Analogically, when man [sic] is in proper relation to God, His [sic] image is reflected in human life" (Dunning 1988, 155).

In is only within the understanding of *relationship* (Creator to creature; creature to creature) that infant baptism takes on sacramental significance. James White names the problem that arises out of discussions regarding baptism: “Unfortunately, most discussions of the subject seem to begin and end with questions as to what the individual baptized gets out of baptism. This is a subsidiary concern... [by focusing on the individual baptized] everything becomes contingent upon me. But baptism is not an individual matter” (White 1983, 45).

If it is not the subject (the child) who is the primary concern of baptism, then who or what is? This question leads us to the crux of the problem. Kathleen Hughes states it eloquently:

... it is the utter gratuity of God’s action in human lives—God’s election, God’s choice, God’s complete acceptance of us as daughters and sons, acceptance prior to anything that we are or do, chose or shun. God’s faithfulness to humankind is expressed in infant baptism, where womb imagery replaces tomb imagery and God’ gifts and grace are showered on infants, adopted into the family of God not because of their choice, their conversion, their change of heart—indeed, none are possible—but because infants are so beloved of God that divine pleasure knows no bonds.... This child is a gift to the community, on loan to us from God, to be cherished as much by us as the child already is by God, to be nurtured and set on the path of faith and love, the path of return to God. (Hughes 1999, 65-6)

The subject (or centre) of infant baptism is then twofold: the theology of prevenient grace and the sacramental potential (as a means of grace) of the community. Cullmann understands the power of the church as a community of faith for nurturing and receiving the child. In regards to our commonality he writes, “All humankind, in principal, has received Baptism long ago, namely on Golgotha, at Good Friday and Easter. There the essential act of baptism was carried out, entirely without our cooperation, and even without our faith. There the whole world was baptized on the ground of the absolutely sovereign act of God, who in Christ first loved us (I John 4:19) before we loved him, even before we believed” (Browning 1985, 141). We must refocus on the concept of relationship: our position before God (creature to Creator) and our position within the community (creature to creature). We

mirror the *imago Dei*, not simply back to God, but to each other. In this sense, there is a genuine priesthood of all within the community: “The community we are initiated into through baptism is a priestly community, a royal priesthood, in which all have gifts to build up one another” (White 1983, 38). We affect and effect grace in each other. The community of “individuals” is united through the Spirit of God we reflect.

The problem the young cleric wrestled with when facing the mother of the stillborn infant was not one of bad theology, but rather a problem resulting from the Western focus on death as a culmination or finality to potential (and therefore to God’s prevenient grace). Grace Jantzen refers to the Western preoccupation with death as “necrophilia” and traces this pattern of thinking from Plato to Levinas to Heidegger to Derrida (Jantzen 1998, 103). Necrophilia is the notion that death confers meaning on life. Jantzen argues that it is life, not death, that grants humans singularity and irreplaceability (Jantzen 1998, 105). Life confers meaning. She refers to this principle as “natality”: “...every person who has lived has been born, and born of a woman. Natality is...a fundamental human condition” (Jantzen 1998, 109).³ Creatively shifting from the Western symbolic of death “infuses us with the possibility of beginning, the potentiality which pervades every aspect of our lives” (Jantzen 1998, 110). Natality is a freedom that emerges from and takes place within bodily existence. There is no Platonic attempt to escape the “prison house of the soul”—the body.

I would push this theory back a step further and argue that it is conception and life within the womb—not necessarily *birth* that grants meaning. Perhaps the notion of the “womb-ian”⁴ nature of life (life originating in the womb) would grant significance prior to actual physical birth. I steer away from Arendt’s use of “natality” because in Western society, we have become familiar with things *pre-natal*. In this sense, it is a birth *within* the womb. Likewise, the womb is not a place to take up permanent residence (for that would surely end in death); neither, however, is it a Platonic “prison house for the soul.” Bodily existence is not separate from life within the womb.

Jantzen’s theory offers significance to the stillborn, not because it has participated in the struggle against death, but in the simple fact of

its life (however brief it may have been). Thus, while you cannot make claims to this mother that “at least your son didn’t have to experience pain or...” you can assure her that her stillborn child *had* and *has* existential significance. He existed. He *mattered*.

Jantzen comments that a “focus on birth [natality] and concrete embodiment impels concern with the material conditions of people’s lives” (Jantzen 1998, 111). The focus on life (embodiment) is holistic. Because the stillborn child *mattered*, because he was relational, *because he had a mother*, concern for the spiritual and emotional needs of the mother becomes primary. Whereas the young pastor understood death as a finality (not necessarily negatively—his theology asserted that the stillborn child was with God), the young mother needed to know that the life of the child bore significance—even his life in the womb. Baptism would have granted that child a name and a place within a grieving community. She needed the church to grieve for the child who was gone from their midst—the potential and *realized* child. She needed someone to acknowledge that her womb *and* her arms were empty:

Natality indicates that each life is special; about each life a story can be told...this story is not the story of a soul, but of an embodied life, situated in material conditions which shape experience and subjectivity and also are shaped by them. It is thus ultimately from natality, constituting as it does the fundamental condition of narrativity, that human stories arise: the concrete events are set into a narrative to form a meaningful whole. From this it follows that if the philosophy of religion is to engage with ideas of suffering and salvation, these cannot be treated as abstract concepts but as occurring within actual narratable individual lives. It is here and nowhere else that suffering and salvation occur; and a conceptualization which does not do justice to the lives of individuals cannot be philosophically or religiously adequate. (Jantzen 1998, 113)

Story is intrinsically linked to ritual; ritual is intrinsically linked to sacrament. “Whenever our celebrations of Eucharist [or any other sacrament] are removed from stories—both past and present—which fill them full of meaning, they are in danger of becoming dead rituals which lack power and saving grace. On the other hand, rituals that grow out of stories we know and claim as our own can enrich and transform our lives” (Vogel 1999, 59). The infant’s story (his narrat-

ability) embeds him in the whole web of life. It is through vitality “that we are connected with every other human being, past, present and future” (Jantzen 1998, 114).

The fact of our narratability roots us within community. Hauerwas explains it like this: “the very claim that every ethic requires a qualifier [i.e. Christian] involves social ethical assumptions, for it means that every ethic reflects a particular people’s history and experience...indeed the notion that one can distinguish between personal and social ethics distorts the nature of Christian convictions...” (Hauerwas 1983, 96). We exist within community and our existence (whether it agrees or disagrees with the dominate communal ethic) impacts the community. In the same light, the community’s story and interpretation effects and affects our participation. Through the commonality of our material birth in the womb, we become narratable.

While some might deem the baptism of a stillborn infant futile—even ineffectual—I contend that its inherent value lies in our being willing to celebrate and mourn the loss of the little one in our community. The sacrament of baptism, in this instance, reminds us of the interconnectedness of life—of the web of relationship we call community, and the grace that goes before. It is a material and outward sign of God’s prevenient grace.

Christianity has long made an association between baptismal waters and amniotic “waters” of the womb. The Apostles’ Creed lays special emphasis that the maternal influence on Jesus was important: “Born of the Virgin Mary....” Clearly this was not achieved without the female body’s cradle. Christ was a womb-ian (native of the womb). Incarnational theology is based in the womb.

The United Methodist Church Book of Worship calls to mind that “In the fullness of time you sent Jesus, nurtured in the water of a womb” (Anonymous 1992, 90). *The United Church of Christ’s Book of Worship* includes a similar liturgy (Anonymous 1986, 141). This rite goes on further to name the role water has played in salvation history though descriptors like “deliverance,” “nurture,” “blessing,” and “washing.” The Incarnation and salvation was made possible in the watery womb of Mary.

The womb was emphasized in Jesus' comment to Nicodemus when he insisted that the prerequisite for entering the Kingdom was that all must be "born again." Christ's conversation about the possibility of re-entering the womb to be "born again" betrays the notion that all life, even Christ's, began in the watery womb. White comments:

New birth is also the most explicitly feminine of the biblical images. The new birth that God gives is, of course, always the act of a woman, whatever the gender of the child born. Thus, when God gives us birth, God gives Godself in a way in which human beings are passive, completely dependent upon God's love and nurture. Perhaps this is why we have been so uncomfortable with birth images and tended to suppress them. The font may be the most female sign the Church has; perhaps that is why we often make it so inconspicuous...the font has been explicitly treated as a womb from which those through water enter a new body, the Church. (White 1983, 41)

Serene Jones (borrowing from Calvin) suggests that the relationship of the church is akin to that of a mother and child: "Just as a child is knit together in her mother's womb, the people of faith are conceived and brought to life in the corporate body of Christ. The image of the church as womb emphasizes the material and embodied ways in which the church forms us" (Jones 2000, 167).⁵ Bedard narrows this view down somewhat, dedicating an entire chapter in his dissertation, *The Symbolism of the Baptismal Font in Early Christian Thought*, to the idea of font as womb or mother (Bedard 1951).

Jones further depicts the salvific or transformative nature of the womb of the Christian community: "In the womb...we are pulled together and refashioned in a manner that contradicts the chaos of sin and gives us new patterns of living Christ's life. Baptism, the rite of Christian initiation, depicts this process well. Just as a child comes into the world through the breaking of the water of the womb, the Christian is born from the birthing, baptismal water of the Church" (Jones 2000, 157). It is arguable that the birth described above, in this sense, is the birth from one womb to another—that is to say, the church is the new nurturing relationship, the new mother (not to usurp the role of the physical mother, but in parallel to her).

That is not to say that the transition comes easily. Physiologically, the birthing process involves a rupture of membranes, the outpouring of amniotic fluid, a blood show, cervical dilation and effacement, uterine contractions and retractions, the descent of the fetus, the tearing of the perineum, the expulsion of the fetus, and the separation and delivery of the placenta. Tissue tearing and rupturing, the spilling of blood and body fluids—this violence is the canal and catalyst for life. Out of destruction and death comes life.

Christine Gudorf makes the case that sacraments are, at their heart, celebrations of what women do naturally—give birth, feed, and comfort—physical experiences that have been “cleaned up” by men and sacralized (Gudorf 1987, 296-309). It is a common feature among contemporary feminist theologians to depict the holiest of church’s functions (the sacraments), with the most bodily of woman’s. It is within the blood and mess, liminal space between life and death that the dynamics of life occur. Frances Croake Frank identified the violent nature of birth, as well as the violence that the church levies against women when they forget Christ’s womb-ian heritage:

Did the woman say,
When she held him for the first time in the dark of a stable,
After the pain and the bleeding and crying,
“This is my body, this is my blood”?

Did the woman say,
When she held him for the last time in the dark rain on a hilltop,
After the pain and the bleeding and the dying,
“This is my body, this is my blood”?

Well that she said it to him then,
For dry old men,
Brocaded robes belying barrenness,
Ordain that she not say it for him now
(LaCugna 1993, 185-186).⁶

The poem expresses a “fact” of the narrative—a woman bore the Son of God. The *theotokos*—Mary, the God-bearer—tends to depict the *human* nature of Christ (Cunneen 1999, 328) (reserving the Divine nature of Christ to his relationship as the Son of God the Father) in

Christian theology. Mary was officially named the *theotokos* at the Council of Ephesus in 431 C.E. Since then, Mary has been attributed with all sorts of miraculous deeds—saving cities, intervening for those she loves, etc. “The compassionate figure of the mother of God permitted believers to preserve their differences as well as their communal ties. Her intercessory role satisfied the most primitive needs for protection at the same time that it supported complex intellectual arguments for her son’s humanity” (Cunneen 1999, 328). While Mary, the God-bearer, served to support the Christology of the hypostatic union, on a local level, Mary—like all our mothers—was invoked to protect us. When we need help, for whom do we cry? The one who nurtured us in the womb.

The doctrine of the priesthood of believers reinforces the theory that the mother serves in a priestly role to her child (born and unborn). The priesthood of believers involves every member of the body of Christ both in individual and corporate responsibility. Each person is priest, not only for themselves (through immediate access to God through Christ), but shares also in the mediation of Christ to others. What does it mean to be a priest? A priest is a “gracious divine provision who serves as mediator between God and humanity to the end that humanity might be transformed into right relationship with God” (Finley 1983, 417). Browning and Reed cite Erik Erikson regarding the priestly role of parents: “The priesthood of parenthood is clearly implied when Erikson reminds us of the power of the loving eyes of the parents to communicate a sense of ultimate well-being and acceptance—not unlike God looking down lovingly into our eyes as we look up for affirmation and acceptance” (Browning 1985, 145). In understanding baptism as a celebration of God’s prevenient grace and the *imago Dei*, it is not difficult to understand that parents—necessarily and particularly—*mothers* (because they physically in-body the infant), function in the role of priest. They represent and act on behalf of the One who creates, redeems, and sustains. They care for the child as they care for themselves.

There is, indeed, precedent within the Christian tradition for maternal functions to be associated with the sacraments as a whole, and with priesthood in particular. Caroline Walker Bynum’s *Holy Feast and*

Holy Fast describes countless images of the female nature or image of God and the church. Striking was Hadewijch of Bingen's poem called "Love's Growth" in which she speaks of being:

...pregnant with Love, a sweet child, which is carried and nourished in pain and finally 'wholly engulfs from within' the mothering soul. Thus to Hadewijch, biological images for the love offered and received by the self are images of the utmost intimacy. To love is to give one's bodily fluid as food, to carry a fetus within oneself, to chew or be chewed; it is not merely to kiss but also to feel the other within one's own bowels or heart. To love is to engulf and be engulfed, to masticate and to assimilate, to flow out with nurture so that one's body becomes food for another. (Bynum 1987, 157)

What is witnessed in her poem is the analogy of the Eucharist with being pregnant—Christ's love allowed himself to become our food; a woman's love requires that her body become the food for her child. The high priestess acts on behalf of the Creator for the creation.

The aseptic environment of theologians has birthed dualistic conceptions of life. God's assumption of humanity is God's chosen self-expression. These hidden dualistic notions, underlying the "cleanup" of the messiness of life in order to masculinize (or *sterilize*—which is what occurs when there is no presence of another sex) the sacraments, require a critique and a retrieval of Incarnational theology. Sacramentality grows out of human embodiment and its connection to the natural world—the womb—not the contrast to it (LaCugna 1993, 195).

It is through remembrance of the womb that the God of the philosophers, the *causa sui*, disseminates. The death of God is, as Vattimo relates it, accomplished nihilism taken to its logical extreme; it is the devaluation of the highest value. This is the liberation of the highest value (God) from a reign of tyranny of the subject (the one who recognizes value) (Vattimo 1985, 20-21). Instead, through heteronomy (Derrida's *différance*) the *Khora* becomes the non-foundational origin. The *Khora* is neither an intelligible form, nor a sensible thing, but rather that within which things are inscribed. Derrida borrows the word itself from the Greek, Platonic word describing a receptacle or place that cannot be reached or touched (Ward 1997, xxxiii). When the creed is recited: "We believe in the Son, eternally begotten of the

Father..." we must ask ourselves where is the mother? The *Khora* is the mother. It is the empty space, the womb (Ward 1997, xxxiv).⁷ Logocentrism (rational-idolatry) is phallogentrism.

In turning to Incarnational (or wombian) theology, we seek neither a return to a sentimental pre-lapsarian "natural order," nor a projection into the future Utopia "when the Kingdom comes." We must hold out for a more correct, more traditional Incarnational theology—one that is realized in the here and now, as well as the not yet. God became flesh and dwelt among us because God chose to. God created the world and "behold it was very good." What is demonstrated though Incarnational theology is the length to which God will go to express love: from the creation (provision/Providence) to desecration (God Incarnate/Kenosis) to the breaking of the boundaries of life and death (resurrection). The scandalous nature of the Divine initiative is our saving grace (Cullmann 1959, 315-328). Sara Maitland explains, "God did not enter into history and bodiliness in order to suffer but in order to redeem—the suffering is quite incidental (even if it is inevitable)" (Hurcombe 1987, 138).

Shifting Incarnational theology from the Western symbolic of death, Immanuel (God-with-us) bears the weight of significance. (Death, sacrifice, and resurrection are secondary to the Incarnate God.) "If we want to 'identify' ourselves with Christ's primary act it must be through a passionate involvement in the process of history and its transformation. The consequence of God's suffering like its purpose, is not that we should suffer more, but that we should suffer less" (Hurcombe 1987, 138). The return to Incarnational theology depicts a God that enters into community, the Church, and moves within it and within its movement.

A correct understanding of Incarnational theology enables one to maintain a Godly-orientation—an eye to God. Alexander Schmemmann describes this life perspective: "...to live in the world seeing *everything* in it as a revelation of God, a sign of His presence, the joy of His coming, the call of communion with Him, the hope for fulfillment in Him" (Schmemmann 1998, 112). Through a sacramental lens, we learn to habituate a sanctified perspective.

There is a bodiliness about the sacraments which cannot go unnoted: “Theology that tells stories of embodiment can really examine what it might mean for God to be revealed in a human body, broken and suffering, whose resurrection proclaims that Love is stronger than death” (Graham 1999, 114). This is the heart of the Christian faith—the mystery of the Incarnation. “The effects and dynamics of power, truth, reason, good and evil never exist as transcendent ideals; they remain to be embodied, enacted and performed in human communities as forms of bodily practice” (Graham 1999, 115).

Baptism paints portraits of death and resurrection. St. Cyril of Jerusalem called the waters of baptism both “your grave and your mother” (White 1983, 42). Baptism, the gift of new life, is announced as “the likeness of death” (Schmemmann 1998, 74). What is pronounced here is not a finality of death, but an eschatological hope. The new life that Christ gives is presented from his earthly cradle (Mary’s womb) to the empty tomb. A retrieval of Incarnational theology demands that we understand the precious nature of human life—God’s chosen self-expression. It demands that we also be conscious of the divine provision—prevenient grace, both directly from God, and mediated through the community. “But the mystery of baptism is not limited to this; it is a promise of greater and more perfect gifts. In it are the promises of future delights; it is the type of the future resurrection, a communion with the master’s passion, a participation in His resurrection, a mantle of salvation, a tunic of gladness, a garment of light, or rather it is light itself” (Browning 1985, 142). Baptism is a celebration of resurrection (Christ’s and ultimately, ours). The baptism of a stillborn child is, therefore, the outward sign of the hidden reality that the child is already resurrected into a new life with God.

A theology and ecclesiology focused on the womb calls for a shift from the modern notion of necrophilia, which centres on death as the source or orienting point for meaning. Instead, life is celebrated in its condition of relationality (to the mother and to the church). Vitality forms and informs significance. Infant baptism (not a volitional decision on the part of the child) is witness to the Divine initiative of prevenient grace—grace that acknowledges the child’s relationship to the One who saves him. This form of baptism speaks grace, then, to the

community at large—to all those in relationship to the child. It testifies to the God who chose us first. Finally, theology and ecclesiology focused on the womb witnesses to the Incarnation and presents us with eschatological hope: that resurrection *can* (and does) occur within material embodiment. We are aware of the Divine love that intercedes and cares like a mother. God desires and wills our potential. God, analogically, also mourns our losses.

I sat on the edge of the bed and asked to hold her little boy.

Rocking his cold, cyanotic, tiny form gently in my arms, I noted his perfection—the details of his hands, his streaks of brown hair. I commented on his likeness to the woman. Her sobs quelled for a moment and she looked me in the eyes. I began to speculate aloud...

For nine months you carried this child in the waters of your womb. You nurtured and nourished him through your own blood. You breathed life into him. Your blood carried oxygen to him, and the impurities and waste out of him. You felt his every kick and twist and tickle. You know him as you know yourself. He is part of you.

In the last hours of labor, your blood was spilled for him; your body was broken for him. Hurting and exhausted from your own outpouring of love, you now doubt your own role.

I straightened my back and carefully delivered the child back into the arms of the high priestess...

You have represented Christ to your son. You have participated in his creation, sustained him, loved him, and redeemed him. You are his priest. You have baptized him in the waters of your womb. Out of those waters he came into new life with Christ. Name your son, and pronounce his baptism. You can. You already have.

Her eyes betrayed a look of fear and wonderment. Rocking the baby close, she hesitantly stated: “Nathan...I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” She smiled through her tears.

Laying my hands on the form in her arms, together we delivered her son into the care of the heavenly Father. In simple unison, we prayed together: “Into your hands we commit Nathan Allan Linden.”

The young cleric stepped up and laid a hand on the child. The community of our trinity sealed the child’s destiny. After another half hour or so, the young mother was ready to release her son’s body to the hospital staff.⁸

Notes

¹ Notation from personal journal, 26 January 1998.

² Dunning argues that prevenient grace is the most far-reaching and pervasive aspect of Wesley's thought (Dunning 1988, 49).

³ This a "reading against the grain" of Hannah Arendt's *Philosophy of Natality*.

⁴ The metaphor of "womb-ian" is intended to merely shift the gaze from a focus on and positing of meaning solely in physical birth, instead to the "quickening" and relationality of life. The metaphor should not be pushed further.

⁵ See also Calvin's *Institutes* 4.1.4, 1016.

⁶ Poem by Francis Croake Frank quoted in the article by Susan A. Ross.

⁷ For Julia Kristeva, the Chora [sic] is womb-like—"a dark, ineffable place from which the semiotic rhythms issue which demand and yet destabilize the symbolic" (Ward 1997, xxxiv).

⁸ Personal Journal, 26 January 2000. Names have been changed for privacy. I could have physically baptized the child as a representative of the church. In this instance, however, to do so would have been to fundamentally undermine the pastor that was present. Perhaps this experience will free him to open his theology further—so that the next time he is faced with a situation, he will have a more grace-full response.

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