

SHIFTING DOMESTIC IMAGES OF CHURCH: FROM HOLY MOTHER CHURCH TO CHURCH AS FAMILY — PROGRESS FOR WOMEN?

1. Introduction

As numbers of active adherents decrease, Christian churches are caught up in self-analysis, part of which involves considering images used to describe themselves. I wish here to examine two common descriptions of church: 'Holy Mother Church', in use since the end of the second century, and 'Church as Family', increasingly in use today.

In considering their value, it is important to consider the power of images and what effects they can have, and to try to understand what type of church is meant when these particular images are used. Both metaphors are generally used in more popular pastoral works in which church speaks to church, rather than in treatments of formal doctrines or in systematic theological analysis. Both, too, are essentially domestic images, relating church to ideas of marriage and family, united by the female figures of wife and mother. Hence, one common theme in this analysis will be the place of women in the church and the church's image of the female. Moreover, with both images questions of church boundaries arise: of whom is the Church a 'mother'; who are the members of this 'family'?

2. Metaphors, models and their use

Calling church 'mother' and 'family' is speaking metaphorically, using figures of speech to 'speak about one thing in terms which are seen to be suggestive of another'.¹ Using models requires a constant awareness that the models are paramorphic, that is they are models *for* and not models *of* church, and consequently are only partially adequate descriptions. So multiple models will always be necessary, as the authors of the Hebrew Testament knew when they had recourse to figures as far-ranging as married love, family life, architecture, pastoral and agricultural labour to describe our relationships to God.

Moreover, even if a model has been a satisfactory model of church, caution is needed. First it is necessary to ensure that the model is still grounded in the experience of the community rather than being one with primarily or even exclusively an emotive value.² In addition, models and symbols 'suggest attitudes and courses of action. ... To some extent they are self-fulfilling; they make the Church become what they suggest the Church is'.³ If any particular model becomes dominant, it is critical to examine why this might be so. To whom is it significant? To whom is it meaningless or objectionable?⁴ Is the model fruitful in the sense that it helps us to understand our lives better.⁵ And perhaps most important of all, has it become understood literally?⁶ After all, the church is neither 'mother' nor 'family'.

3. Holy Mother Church

With many scriptural passages supporting the idea of church as 'mother' (e.g. Isaiah 1:8,21,27; 49:14-26; Jeremiah laments 1:1,5; Ezekiel 16:20; Rev 17:5, 19:7, 21:9; Galatians 4:21-31; Romans 7:2-4; Ephesians 5:23-33), it is not

surprising that the image was in use by the end of the second century C.E. The first written use seems to have occurred in a letter from the Gallic church to the church in Asia Minor in 177 recounting the suffering and deaths of martyrs at Lyons and Vienne: 'in peace they went to God, not leaving grief to their Mother, nor discord and strife to their brethren, but joy and peace and harmony and love'.⁷ Because the letter used 'mother' without adding 'church', the idea of church as 'mother' was probably already current in the church in Asia Minor from which the Gallic church stemmed, although it was not developed by early Syriac Fathers.⁸

The combined phrase 'Mother Church' appears for the first time in the writings of Tertullian. Significantly, and consistent with later usage, it is found not in his great works but in his less pretentious, practical writings, in a letter *Ad Martyras* of 197: 'Domina Mater Ecclesia de uberibus suis ... subministrat' he writes, expressing dignity and reverential awe for the church represented as a mother breast-feeding her children.⁹ Clement of Alexandria too used 'Mother Church' pastorally: 'The Mother draws the children to herself; and we seek our Mother, the church' he writes in the middle (moral training) section of his trilogy.¹⁰

In contrast, for Clement's one-time pupil Origen, Mother Church was pre-eminently the heavenly Zion, rather than the church on earth. For him 'The church too is our Mother, whom God the Father through the Holy Spirit took unto Himself as spouse. Through her he begets sons and daughters for himself'.¹¹ Methodius of Phillipi continued this more mystical tradition of the East. For him, the Church, the second Eve, was born from the side of Christ, and Christ and the Church were wed as the Church came into existence: 'from this union we are conceived and born, the Church is made Mother Church'.¹² St Cyprian brings us down to earth. As Bishop, he was concerned with his flock, with the unity and faith of the Christians of Carthage. And salvation and liberation from sin required church membership: 'he cannot have God for Father, who has not the Church for Mother'¹³, a telling phrase for later generations.

So from the beginning, tensions between ideas of visible and invisible church, between the church on earth and the church in heaven, are found in uses of the image of Mother Church. The strands of the image are woven and braided; on the one hand the mystical bride of Christ, on the other the mother of earthly children. Down the ages we readily get glimpses of 'her'. In an Exultet roll miniature from Monte Cassino of the eleventh century *Mater Ecclesia* is illustrated as a woman of superhuman stature and majestic appearance standing in the central nave of a Romanesque basilica with a group of dignified reverential clergy on one side, and eager confident people on the other.¹⁴

By the twentieth century, Mother Church, or more often Holy Mother Church, has become a major title for church in the Catholic Church, frequently used in prayers, sermons and exhortations. Moreover, the church is now Mother and Teacher, *Mater et Magistra*. Although Vatican II marked an abrupt change in language and images of Church in most Catholic writings¹⁵, the mystical bride of Christ and the stern Mother and Teacher have not vanished. For example, Pope John Paul II said during his Australian tour 1986 that 'The church is the sacrament of Gods' love. She is a communion of faith and life. She is mother and teacher'.¹⁶

4: Meanings of Mother and Motherhood

The central question for considering the image of church as mother is the meaning of motherhood to the writers, most of whom were men. It is not a topic any of the authors addresses — the first book to address the meaning of motherhood would appear to be Adrienne Rich's in 1977.¹⁷ So it is not easy to ascertain the meaning of motherhood either in the second and third centuries CE when Church as Mother came into use, or throughout the centuries. Graeco-Roman mythology had little time for motherhood. Mother-goddesses may have reigned supreme in prehistoric ages (the evidence is much argued over), but neither Greek nor Roman mythology has any great model of motherhood among the gods. Hera, wife and sister of Zeus, goddess of fertility and motherhood and patron of marriage, is depicted as beautiful but nagging; and Athena, Zeus' daughter, is born not from Hera but from Zeus' forehead — hardly an advertisement for mothering. In the Graeco-Roman world of the first century CE women were legally minors under male guardianship.¹⁸ Marriage was for the production of children who belonged to the father's family.¹⁹ So mothers were dependents and the children not their own.

The Jewish world was similar. Proverbs may praise mothers and fathers equally, and the fourth commandment order children to honour both father and mother, but women were still valued according to approved roles in the family. Barrenness was failure, as Rachel and Sarah knew. Giving birth was essential for a woman to be fully accepted into the society; even if it had to be followed by a purification ceremony. Christianity brought little permanent change in the status of women. The martyr Perpetua found strength by dreaming of being 'made a male'²⁰; and while Ambrose praised mother-love²¹, his pupil Augustine celebrated the church as 'the true mother of all Christians' by writing 'It is You who make wives subject'.²² Christian Europe honoured the chaste wife and mother, who was prolific, hardworking, and devoted to her housekeeping and her family but gave her little sense of identity. The social image of mother has been, above all, a domestic one, an image of a woman at home, not part of the public world, bearing and nurturing children, dependent on men for shelter, food and status.

5. What does church as 'mother' mean?

It is not easy, therefore, to elucidate what is being meant when the church is described as mother. One problem is the meaning of motherhood; another is the confusion of images. Mother Church is a mystical church, a church of heavenly Zion, the bride of God who is our Father, and then mother of us all, and also the bride of Christ. In popular works, the appeal is that of affection, sentiment and emotion. A mid-twentieth century example:

For it is eminently the visible Church on earth, the Church that is near, the Church that teaches and guides and labors, that feels, that loves, that is loved and hated and persecuted, which appeals and is naturally accepted as Mother Church.²³

This Mother Church bears little relationship to the reality of earthly mothers and their daily lives. She has authority: they had little, and none outside the home. Moreover, when Mother Church is an ideal mother, it is not only the church which is affected. The metaphor also strongly influences the idea of motherhood and of being female. Two subjects of a metaphor interact²⁴, so that if 'mother' is

used for 'church', this influences how mothers are seen. A perfect, mystical, heavenly church exalts motherhood to the exclusion of other images of the female and severely circumscribes the range of women's lives and aspirations; it equates femaleness with being a mother. Moreover, no actual mother can conform to this ideal while no child depends for ever on its mother. And some people have been abused by their mothers.

In addition, this church described as Mother Church is certainly not us: we are to be dutiful children of a 'mother' church somehow above us. This separation between the church and the members of the church is especially clear when church is both 'mother' and 'teacher' — *mater et magistra*. Nicholas Lash, incisive as ever, notes sadly that 'it is bitterly ironic that Cyprian's metaphor of the fecundity of reconciling grace should have become a symbol of structures and attitudes that stifle and oppress and alienate'.²⁵

6. Use of 'family' as image for church today

Since Vatican II, in Sunday sermons and episcopal letters the image of church as 'mother' has disappeared and been replaced either by 'the people of God', or by church as 'family'. One sign of the increase in usage of 'family' as an image of church can be seen by the addition to the 1988 edition of Dulles' *Models of Church* of a new section on Church as Community, with 'family' as one designation of that community. Australian bishops and priests frequently use 'family' to describe both the parish community and the whole church. In these usages, the image of church as 'family' presents a cosy, safe image of family life and is usually accompanied by a dependency on the fatherhood of God as the primary metaphor for God.

This cosy image of family life is belied by present family studies of domestic violence and child abuse which need not be detailed here. Yet in spite of the reality of the terror of family life for far too many Australians, phrases such as 'family of the parish' 'family of God' used by bishops, priests and theologians seem to be attempts to describe an inclusive, warm and loving community in which all have a place. As with the use of 'mother', 'family' is appealing to the emotions, idealist rather than realist in its use of metaphor. Furthermore, there appears to be no consideration of what such a focus on idealised notions of family as church have on single, widowed, and homosexual members of the church or on the merit awarded to other relationships outside of the traditional family.

7. Meaning of church as family

While use of metaphors such as 'the family of God' and 'the family of the parish' seem to be attempts to describe a warm loving inclusive community, such usage needs to be compared with the type of family modelled by the church and preached liturgically. If the present church is a family, it is a patriarchal family of male control with lay members as children. Vatican II gives expression to this. *Lumen Gentium* says that the 'bishop is father to his priests' while '[the priests] should bestow their paternal attention and solicitude on [the faithful], whom they have begotten spiritually through baptism and instruction' (Vatican II 1975 386).

Liturgically too, patriarchal families are upheld, as can be seen from examination of the scriptural texts chosen for the liturgy for use on the Feast of the Holy Family. In Year A, the Psalm (Ps 128: 1-5) clearly addresses the male as head and owner of the household: it refers to 'Your wife like a fruitful vine /in the heart of your house/ your children like shoots of the olive/ around your table'; while the epistle, Colossians 3: 12-21, confirms the subordinate place of women and children: 'Wives give way to your husbands, as you should in the Lord ... Children be obedient to your parents always, because that is what will please the Lord'. In years B and C, Hebrew Scripture readings proclaim that the reward for faith is the birth of a son, in Year B to Sarah (Gen 15:1-6. 21: 1-3), and in Year C to Hannah (1 Sam 1:20-22,24-28). Even if the prayers which surround these scripture readings pray to 'unite our families in peace and love' (Prayer Over the Gifts, Year A), the assembled community has heard these stories of male-dominated families in which women exist to produce male heirs proclaimed as 'the word of God'.

Needless to say, such readings are not balanced on other Sundays by readings which celebrate the authority, strength and wisdom of women. In selections from the Old Testament in the whole three-year cycle, no woman is a major actor in any text chosen for a Sunday or major feast. Only three women (plus Eve) are given voice — two on Feasts of the Holy Family when Sarah and Hannah give thanks for a son; the third woman is the unnamed Shunammite who befriended Elisha. Salvation history is presented as the story of the deeds of men while women are producers of male children. Patterns of dominance and submission are held up as images of family, and this in the name of God.²⁶

There seems to be a dichotomy between the emotional image of church as expressed in letters and sermons and the image expressed in structures and liturgy.

8. What image of church do we want?

Both Church as Mother and church as Family are based on hierarchical images of Church, not just in their dependence on God and clergy as Father, but also to the extent to which they keep the majority of church goers as children. For Mother Church, all, except perhaps those in authority, are always and everywhere children. Changing from Mother church to church as 'family' appears to create a less stern, more democratic image of church: all together as one big happy family. But families by definition are not a gathering of equals: they are parents and children; and they are not all-inclusive: my neighbours are not my family. So church as 'family' essentially keeps some members of church as permanent children and pretends to an inclusiveness and an equality which the image does not uphold.

Committed members of the church today are seeking a church of freedom and equality which acknowledges that the Spirit cannot be tamed, cannot be owned. This is not to deny all authority. It is to recognise that the official powers in the church which are conferred by the sacrament of Orders become effective because authority is freely given by believers through their faith. Such a church is a de-clericalized one; authority is no longer based on hierarchy, but is gift for service. Those in offices of ministry are not *in loco parentis* responsible for controlling unruly children. All, ordained and not-ordained, are part of the one church, working together for the freedom of all people, churched and non-

churched. Rahner has challenged those who hold to present hierarchal church structures, who model church on Mother and Teacher, on Family with themselves as Father:

those who love, who are unselfish, who have a prophetic gift in the church, constitute the real church and are far from being always identical with the office-holders. It is of course part of the Catholic faith that the Spirit of God in the Church is able to prevent an absolute schism between those who simply possess the Spirit and those who hold office, and therefore the latter also in virtue of their social function — but only in the last resort — enjoy a certain gift of the Spirit. As soon as these obvious dogmatic truths are lived and practiced impartially and taken for granted by officeholders and other Christians, then we have what we call a declericalized church: that is, a church in which the officeholders too in joyous humility allow for the fact that the Spirit breathes where it will and that it has not arranged an exclusive and permanent tenancy with them.²⁷

Neither Church as Mother nor Church as Family gives us a model of church as a community of equals. We need better models if the church of the twenty-first century is to be a source of freedom, equality and love in a troubled world.

¹ Soskice, Janet Martin (1992) *Metaphor and Language* Clarendon Paperbacks Oxford UP Oxford, 15.

² *ibid* 147,8.

³ Dulles, Avery (1978) *Models of the Church* Image Books New York USA, 24,25.

⁴ *ibid* 61.

⁵ McFague, Sally (1982) *Metaphorical Theology. Models of God in Religious language* Fortress Press Philadelphia, 27.

⁶ *ibid* 72.

⁷ Plumpe, Joseph C (1943) *Mater Ecclesia. An Inquiry into the concept of the church as mother in early christianity.* The Catholic University of America Press, Washington DC. 36,37.

⁸ Murray, Robert (1975) *Symbols of Church and Kingdom. A study in early syriac tradition* Cambridge University Press, London, 124.

⁹ Plumpe *op cit* 46.

¹⁰ *ibid* 64.

¹¹ *ibid* 78,79.

¹² *ibid* 111,113.

¹³ *ibid* 90.

¹⁴ *ibid* figure facing p85.

¹⁵ Vatican II documents illustrate the fading of an image. For example, the 40-paged *Sacrosanctum Concilium* of December 1963 uses 'Holy Mother Church' 'Mother Church' or 'Church our Mother' for seven out of seventy uses of Church. As Council members turned more to the People of God to describe church, in the 77 pages of *Lumen Gentium* of November 1964, the title is used about three times, and these are mostly brief, almost summary, references. By May 1967 with the publication of *Eucharisticum Mysterium* there are no uses of 'Holy Mother Church' or 'Mother Church' in 36 pages with thirty-nine references to Church. These are perhaps trivial data, but, along with the changes made to the

liturgy in which most references to 'Mother Church' are removed, they illustrate a church changing its image of itself (Vatican II Documents 1975, 1ff, 100ff, 350ff).

¹⁶ Clancy, E (1994) *The Catholic Weekly* April 13.

¹⁷ Rich Adrienne (1977) *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as experience and institution* Virago London.

¹⁸ Lerner, Gerda (1986) *The Creation of Patriarchy*, OUP Oxford, 202.

¹⁹ Rawson, Beryl (1986) 'The Roman Family' in *The Family in Ancient Rome New Perspectives* ed B Rawson Croom Helm pb Routledge 1992, 8,9.

²⁰ Brown, Peter (1988) *The Body and Society: men, women and sexual renunciation in early christianity* Faber and Faber London 74.

²¹ Eyben, Emiel (1991) 'Fathers and Sons' in Rawson, B ed *Marriage, Divorce, Children in Ancient Rome* Humanities Research Centre Canberra, Clarendon Press Oxford 1991 114-143, 117.

²² Brown op cit 364.

²³ Plumpe op cit 72.

²⁴ Soskice op cit 17.

²⁵ Lash, Nicholas (1995) 'An Old Woman With a Book' *Priests & People* August-September 310-314, 312.

²⁶ Uhr, M L (1988) 'The Portrayal of Women in the Lectionary' *St Mark's Review* **135** 1988 22-25.

²⁷ Rahner, Karl (1992) 'A Declericalized Church' from 'The Shape of the Church to Come' (original publication 1972) in Karl Rahner *Theologian of the graced search for meaning* ed Geoffrey B Kelly Fortress Press Minneapolis.