

## **“Mothers of God”**

A week before Palm or Passion Sunday on the Christian calendar this year, I was invited to speak to our seventh and eighth graders. They were studying “Neighboring Faiths.” This is what our Religious Education Program calls the unit during which the students attend different churches, synagogues and mosques in the area. Participating in the services of Jews, Protestants, Catholics and Muslims gives the youth an opportunity to experience the way in which different faith communities ritualize or celebrate their beliefs. I can’t imagine a more valuable preparation for living in a religiously pluralist culture. Of all the countries in the world, the United States is reputed to have the most religiously diverse population.

Such diversity has both its dangers and opportunities. It all depends on how willing we are to learn about each other, how willing we are to assume the responsibility of living in a democratic society. Differences can either divide and separate us or be a source of enrichment. A good case can be made for the value of different religions in a culture. Just as different life forms contribute to a healthy, sustainable ecosystem, so too do different faith traditions contribute to a healthy, sustainable spiritual environment.

This is why I appreciated being a guest in the “Neighboring Faiths” class last March. The learning experience was enriched by the presence of a number of the students’ parents, some of whom brought their own Catholic experience into the discussion. The students were preparing to attend Mass on Palm Sunday. My own Catholic background made me a likely resource person. In case I lost the students’ attention, I brought along a picture or two of myself as a nun, one pre-Vatican II and the other post.

The question became which of the two co-cathedrals to attend. Both are within three blocks of here. I recommended St. Joseph’s over Immaculate Conception, despite my own ethnic background. Historically, the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception identified more with the Irish population, while St. Joseph’s was considered to be more French Canadian.

Admittedly, the title “Immaculate Conception” is open to misinterpretation and could have biased my choice. But my recommendation was based more on what I thought would be a better liturgical experience, plus St. Joseph’s is more rooted in the Old North End.

It’s always interesting to ask people, Catholic or otherwise, how they understand the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, whether it refers to active or passive conception. Does it refer to how Mary actively conceived Jesus or how she herself was passively conceived by Ann, her mother.

It comes as a surprise to some that it has nothing to do with the virgin birth or

ordinary conception itself being less than immaculate. Rather, it refers to the teaching defined in 1854 that Mary alone was conceived full of grace. In other words, she alone was spared any taint of Original Sin. The doctrine was meant to emphasize the need of grace, given the presence of Original Sin from birth. According to church historians, the Vatican was concerned by what was termed "Americanism," a certain over-confidence regarding salvation, born of a pioneer youthful spirit in the new world. So the response to this "do it yourself" spirit was to declare that only one person came into the world full of grace, the Mother of Jesus.

You have read recently in the press that Pope Benedict XVI has revised the church's official teaching on Limbo, that kind of border region or in-between place where unbaptized infants and adults were consigned. This brings up some serious questions regarding the doctrine of Original Sin, which theologians have been questioning for over half a century. Ultimately, this might even mean that we are all Immaculate Conceptions. In which case, I will wish you all a happy feast day on December 8<sup>th</sup>, a special day when the Roman Catholic church celebrates Mary...and you.

I remember some years ago I attended a Mass at the Cathedral bordered by Pearl and Cherry Streets. It may even have been December 8<sup>th</sup>. Bishop John Marshall preached a sermon on Mary. One line I find hard to forget. He said: "How far short we fall from the sanctity of this woman." I remember thinking at the time what mother would say that to her children, "How far short you fall..." This is the problem with putting anyone on a pedestal, with what I call pedestalism. It separates people, putting some down while elevating others.

This is why Mother's Day makes me uncomfortable, when some women are pedestaled. Spiritual author and theologian Matthew Fox speaks about the "pseudo elevation of literal motherhood" celebrated on this day in a patriarchal culture (Fox p.223). Please understand, I'm all for any excuse to celebrate, for families getting together for brunch or dinner. Yet what woman doesn't regret the manipulation of the original purpose and motivation for Mother's Day? The strong voice of our foremothers that we hear in Julia Ward Howe's proclamation is muted. "Arise, all women who have hearts, whether your baptism be that of water or of fears! Say firmly: We will not have great questions decided by irrelevant agencies.... From the bosom of the devastated earth, a voice goes up with our own. It says, 'Disarm, Disarm!'"

Being pedestaled is another way of being marginalized, rendered powerless. Bess Truman had to have felt marginalized when her husband Harry made the fatal decision to drop an atomic bomb on Japan, first on Hiroshima, August 6<sup>th</sup>, 1945, and three days later on Nagasaki. His wife, whom President Truman often spoke of as "the boss," was never consulted about this tragic decision. According to their daughter, Margaret, their relationship was never the same after this catastrophic event.

The story is not meant to contribute to any sexist stereotype that would blame wars solely on one gender. At the same time, I do find real value in the idea of having a daycare center in the Pentagon, a place as Julia Ward Howe said, "Where great questions are decided by irrelevant agencies." The center would be a place where those making these decisions would be required to spend time caring for the basic needs of infants and children. Contact with their vulnerable charges might bring home in a visceral way the consequences of their decisions, like the burning of innocent flesh.

Once I shared this idea in a discussion with a group of college students. A male student strongly protested saying, "That would emasculate them." He was in effect saying that it would render the men unfit for military service. If Carl Jung had been part of this discussion, he would have allayed this young man's fears by saying, "Don't worry. Caring for infants won't emasculate soldiers. It could only make them more creative in their decision-making."

Jung maintained the creative process has a feminine quality, that creativity arises from unconscious depths from what he describes as "the realm of the mothers" (Fox p. 222). Matthew Fox, whom I referenced earlier as objecting to the pseudo elevation of literal motherhood, criticizes the patriarchal tradition for pretty much ignoring "...our responsibility to develop the mother in ourselves, whether we are women or men, married or celibate, heterosexual or homosexual" (Ibid).

For a number of years, Fox was a Dominican priest, a scholar renowned for his writing and preaching until his theology became too creative for the institutional church. One thing that particularly rattled the authorities is that he hired Starhawk, a Wiccan, to be a liturgical consultant on the staff of his Institute for Creation Spirituality. Much of Fox's work and writing is inspired by the spirituality of a fellow Dominican, the 13<sup>th</sup> century mystic Meister Eckhart. It has been said that Eckhart is better known by Buddhists, Hindus and Sufis today than he is by Christians.

Despite the fact that this man was considered to be the greatest of the German mystics, his life ended under the shadow of condemnation by the church. He defended himself brilliantly in saying, "I may err, but I am not a heretic, for the first has to do with the mind and the second with the will" (Ellsberg, p. 137). Still, Pope John XXII condemned a list of 28 propositions attributed to Eckhart. It is questionable whether he ever learned of his condemnation since, by the time it was issued, he was already dead.

Traditionally, mystics have made ecclesiastical authorities nervous. They think too much outside the box. Eckhart was concerned about the power of illusion, about the way in which false religious images impeded a person's access to reality. All of which led him to pursue the God beyond "god," using the language of paradox, he prayed to God to be spared of "god." Ralph Waldo Emerson, writing five centuries later, expresses a similar sentiment when he wrote "When

we have broken our god of tradition, and ceased from our god of rhetoric, then may God fire the heart with his presence” (Frome, p. 52).

Like Emerson, Eckhart was influenced by Eastern theology and wisdom literature. He was also influenced by the Beguines, a liberation movement of women in their day who led independent religious lives, unhindered by rules, enclosure or church approval. This movement flourished in the Low Countries and Germany in the 13th century (Ellsberg, p. 320). Ultimately, the Beguines were suppressed. Scholars have suggested that Eckhart’s unjust condemnation was in part due to his strong support of this movement as well as the peasant movements of his day (Fox, p. 310).

It is not hard to imagine how the teaching of Eckhart upset the authorities concerned about orthodoxy. Teachings like “We are all meant to be mothers of God for God is always needing to be born,” language that had to be at the least offensive to pious ears. This expression is used by the Vatican to warn theologians when they have gone too far. Matthew Fox, commenting on this particular text, says that, “If Eckhart is correct when he declares that ‘We are all meant to be mothers of God,’ then it follows (in some sense) that we are all meant to be mothers” (Fox, p. 222).

In support of this idea, Matthew Fox quotes Rabbi Abraham Heschel, who wrote that in each and every person there is a potential mother. “No person is sterile. Every soul is pregnant with the seed of insight. It is vague and hidden. In some people, the seed grows, in others it decays. Some give birth to life. Others miscarry it. Some know how to bear, to nurse, to rear an insight that comes into being. Others do not...” (Fox, p. 222).

I love the way in which Heschel, Fox and Eckhart use maternal language, the way in which they expand the concept of motherhood, the way in which they “democratize” it, make it available to men and women. In the same inclusive spirit, the poet Adrienne Rich defines feminism as “developing the nurturing qualities of women and men.”

Matthew Fox wonders what it would mean to live in a society where both men and women nurtured themselves and others. Speaking as a theologian, he suggests that living in a nurturing society would mean the recovery of the tradition of God as Mother that flourished wherever religion preceded patriarchy (Fox, p. 223).

A society in which we covenant to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person, in which we promote compassion in human relations, acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth—this kind of society promises to be a nurturing society. It might not be one in which everyone is comfortable with the tradition of God as Mother or Father or even with the tradition of God.

Yet this is what I value about our Society, where we try to be indulgent with one another, where no one fears “offending pious or impious ears.” I trusted your indulgence with me in titling this sermon “Mothers of God,” especially the indulgence of the devout atheists and agnostics among us. My hope is that in place of the word “god,” you are able to substitute what you value most, like Mothers of Life, or Love, or Justice. I have often said that atheism serves a necessary function in religion. It acts as a catharsis, a purification for inauthentic religion. It helps to keep religion honest.

When Eckhart prays to God to be delivered from “god,” he is echoing the sentiment of Emerson who wanted to break with the god of tradition and of rhetoric. I find Eckhart’s idea of each person bringing to birth a unique aspect of the divine as appealing as it is challenging.

The mystic himself acknowledges the difficulty in these words: “A human being has so many skins inside, covering the depths of the heart. We know so many things, but we don’t know ourselves! Why, 30 or 40 skins or hides, as thick and hard as an ox’s or bear’s, cover the soul. Go into your own ground and learn to know yourself there,” says Eckhart.

Maternal imagery brings home the inevitability of pain in the creative process, of the importance of exercise during a time of pregnancy. When one’s soul is pregnant with the seed of insight, spiritual exercises are critical in order to bear, to nurse, and to rear that insight into being.

In this community, I like to think that each person is meant to bring forth a unique facet of the divine. It harmonizes with my understanding of our faith tradition. Gary has described UU-ism as the democratic method applied to religion. John Buehrens, the former president of the UUA, speaks of this religion as providing the spiritual resources for living in a democratic society.

Just recently, Diana Eck in her book, *A New Religious America*, describes our democratic society as the most religiously diverse place on earth, going far beyond the Protestant, Catholic and Jewish description of the 50’s. We ought to be learning about “Neighboring Faiths” on all levels, not just the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grades. As we learn about different religions, we expand our understanding of one another and of the mystery at the heart of being.

In saying that “We are all meant to be mothers of God because God is always needing to be born,” Eckhart is inviting us to expand, in a sense democratize, our concept of motherhood. At the same time, I believe he is democratizing the concept of God, making the divine mystery infinitely conceivable (as accessible as one another!) In a society, a faith community where we are free to apply the democratic method to religion, I believe that this is what we are encouraged to do—conceive, bear, nurse and rear our own spiritual insight into being!

Happy Mother's Day.

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