

Opening Prayer (offered spontaneously)

As we celebrate Mother's Day, I want to put it in the context of contemporary American families. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics: "Currently, 30 percent of American families are now headed by single parents, either divorced, widowed, or never married. Today 40% of children are born out of wedlock. Some children live in foster families; others live in step-families or in gay and lesbian families. In more than two thirds of families, both parents work outside the home.

Any group of people living together in a household can create and call themselves a family. The variations of family structures and definition are almost endless, but they have certain qualities in common: *Family members share their lives emotionally and together fulfill the multiple responsibilities of family life.*" This is all that matters today- families, however they are structured, share their lives emotionally and together fulfill the *mutual* responsibilities of family life. The word mutual is important, because it speaks to healthy interdependence.

I am cautious when I preach on Mother's Day. It is easy to fall into the trap that Hallmark sets for us of worshiping an idealized notion of the perfect Mother. Each of us also brings our own set of expectations to Mother's Day. To state the obvious, not every woman has been or will be a mother. In the same way, not every man has been or will be a father – or should be. The ability to have progeny has nothing directly with one's value or lack of value as a human being and being a beloved child of God.

Some of you had the mothers you were given, and not necessarily the ones you would have chosen. Some of you may have another person in your life that provided love that your mother could not. To have a complex family history, including relationships with one's parents is *normal*.

Perhaps some of you ARE or WERE the perfect mother. Perhaps some of you had the perfect mother, who had some or all of the characteristics Moses just read to us: intelligent, holy, steadfast, beauty, and wise –to pick 5 out of the dozens of attributes on this list. But many of us are far from perfect.

In the Christian tradition, some look to Mary, the Mother of Jesus, as a role model. Within the Catholic Church, Holy Mary is venerated, but the veneration is not because of her skills or behavior as a mother, which are not described *at all* in the Bible, but because of her role.

Archbishop Fulton Sheen sums up a traditional view of this in his book *The World's First Love. I hope it makes you angry as it made me*: "God, who made the sun, also made the moon. The moon does not take away from the brilliance of the sun. The moon would only be a burnt-out cinder floating in the immensity of space were it not for the sun. All its light is reflected from the sun. The Blessed Mother reflects her Divine Son: without Him she is nothing. With Him she is the Mother of Men.

On dark nights we are grateful for the moon; when we see it shining, we know there must be a sun. So in this dark night of the world, when men turn their backs on Him Who is the Light of the World, we look to Mary to guide their feet while we await the sunrise.”

I disagree with Archbishop Sheen. Mary was far more than a passive vessel. Mary is to be honored for her courage, the raw courage to bear the son of God, whether she knew in advance how his life on earth would end or not.

But even more important than her courage in saying “yes”, was her battle cry for justice, which gets overlooked. Mary knew that only through and *because* of her, Jesus and his followers would bring down the powerful from their thrones and lift up the lowly. The hungry would be fed and the rich would be sent away empty. In this way, Mary was an all-seeing, all-powerful force for liberation and revolution. This is a far better reason for us to view Mary as a reflection of *God’s* desire for peace and justice.

For those of us that don’t match the idealized description, we have a few choices. We can lament or feel bad about ways we fall short. We can think to ourselves, “Maybe if I were more intelligent, more holy, a more generous person, or freer from anxiety, other people and/or God would love me more.” We can allow the demons of comparison and self-flagellation drive us crazy. Another choice is to respond by saying that the list of traits of wisdom is *only one part of how* we see ourselves as human beings. Paul’s Letter to the Romans carries the antidote to the dis-eases of self-doubt and self-criticism:

*“No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”*

Notice that in this quote, that we are far more than conquerors through God who *first* loved us. The natural response to such incredible love is that we desire to return it to God and to everyone around us. This is Christ’s love, being born out through us.

Love is perhaps the most important aspect of all relationships; between friends and among family members, including mothers. We venerate unconditional love. We seek it, through loved ones and with God.

This is the love that Mirabai of India described:

“I remember how my mother would hold me.  
I would look up at her sometimes and see her weep.  
I understand now what was happening.  
Love so strong a force it broke the cage, and she disappeared for a blessed moment.”

Being held, by a parent; or the act of holding a child or a grandchild, can be overwhelming. Mirabai’s mother weeped out of overwhelming love, much as we imagine Mary weeping with baby Jesus in her arms.

Both mothers wept because truly loving means to die to oneself. And this is not a one-time thing. To be a mother is an eternal commitment. Selfless love allows us to feel deeply connected. We can become lost and our sense of self can disappear into another. Such love, whether it is between friends, family members, or directed to God can be transforming. It breaks down barriers between two people; love breaks through the “cage” of who we think we are. The bars of the cage of self melt away and there is only love, divine love.

Hafiz, the great Persian poet wrote, “I am a hole in a flute that the Christ’s breath moves through- listen to this music.” When you and I open ourselves to Christ, truly open our hearts, his breath moves through us and we sing our note and join with others to create his song.

As Mirabei thought about sitting in her mother’s lap, perhaps decades afterwards, perhaps in the very midst of her ministry to the dalit, the untouchables in ancient India, Mirabei remembered her childhood sense of freedom and security in her mother’s arms. That love shaped her, at a cellular level.

But losing oneself altogether in one’s children is not healthy. I remember my mother telling me, “if I lost you, my children, I don’t know what I would do.”

This was dependent love, in which my mother’s sense of self and purpose was limited to her role as mother to four children. With time, however, she went back to school, began teaching, and developed a good sense of self. That didn’t mean she loved her children any less, but it also meant that she loved herself too.

I am reminded that someone once told me that a good relationship is like a bridge between two towers. Each of the towers must be strong enough to both carry its own weight and share its portion of the roadway between them. If one or both of the towers is weak, if it sways in the wind or a stiff current, then the whole relationship suffers. This principle holds true for parents and their children, and between a couple.

Coming back to our Wisdom text, it reads, “Although she is but one, she can do all things, and while remaining in herself, she renews all things.” Holy wisdom enables one to both remain in oneself and to renew all things around one. Holy parenting means to foster the growth in others. Thomas Aquinas wrote about fostering growth in others in his poem, “What Does Light Talk About?”:

*When you recognize her beauty,  
The eye applauds, the heart stands in an ovation,  
And the tongue when is near  
Is on its best behavior,  
It speaks more like light.*

*What does light talk about?  
I asked a plant that once.*

*It said, “I am not sure,  
But it makes me  
grow.”*

Whether you identify as male, female or both/and or neither;  
Whether you have been, or are now a parent – or have never been and have no desire to be one,  
the question is:  
Do others grow when they are around you?  
Are they drawn to the light within you?

If you have unresolved issues, and who doesn't? take care of them so that every part, every nook and cranny of your being is filled with light. If you feel like the light within you is small, then pay attention to your light and gently encourage it to grow, each day. Notice the light in others as well. By paying attention, that light will grow and grow until it fills you.

Luke 11:36: *“If you are filled with light, with no dark corners, then your whole life will be radiant, as though a floodlight were filling you with light.”*

Remember these words from St. Simeon, the New Theologian:

*For if we genuinely love Him,  
we wake up inside Christ's body  
where all our body, all over,  
every most hidden part of it,  
is realized in joy as Him,  
and He makes us, utterly, real.*

Then, once you are filled with Christ's joy, “let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to God in heaven.” Matthew 5:16

Our Wisdom text offers both a challenge and a blessing to us:

May you love with wisdom. May you love others into holy souls and make them friends of God and prophets. May you love with such a force, that every part of your body and soul is realized in joy as the Divine and Transcendent Christ. Happy Mother's Day. Amen.

### **Readings**

Wisdom of Solomon 7:7-30 (This reading is from the Apocrypha for Protestant bibles but is part of the Catholic and Eastern Orthodox bibles. It is from a Jewish writer about 20 CE who was influenced but yet separate from the surrounding Greek culture. Athena was the Greek goddess of wisdom. It presents an idealized vision of wisdom and a feminine image of God.

### **The Nature of Wisdom**

There is in her a spirit that is intelligent, holy,  
unique, manifold, subtle,  
mobile, clear, unpolluted,  
distinct, invulnerable, loving the good, keen,  
irresistible, beneficent, humane,

steadfast, sure, free from anxiety,  
all-powerful, overseeing all,  
and penetrating through all spirits  
that are intelligent, pure, and altogether subtle.  
For wisdom is more mobile than any motion;  
because of her pureness she pervades and penetrates all things.  
For she is a breath of the power of God,  
and a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty;  
therefore nothing defiled gains entrance into her.  
For she is a reflection of eternal light,  
a spotless mirror of the working of God,  
and an image of his goodness.  
Although she is but one, she can do all things,  
and while remaining in herself, she renews all things;  
in every generation she passes into holy souls  
and makes them friends of God, and prophets;  
for God loves nothing so much as the person who lives with wisdom.  
She is more beautiful than the sun,  
and excels every constellation of the stars.  
Compared with the light she is found to be superior,  
for it is succeeded by the night,  
but against wisdom evil does not prevail.

“Our next reading is from Mirabai of India, who born as a princess in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century. Her songs are sung by Hindus, Muslims, and Sikks alike. As a small child, a wandering sadhu, ascetic, or wise man placed a tiny statue of Krishna in her hand and from then on, she considered herself to be married to Krishna. She later became a sadhu, poet and passionate advocate for human and women’s rights. This poem is particularly appropriate for Mother’s Day.”

#### I WRITE OF THAT JOURNEY

I remember how my mother would hold me.  
I would look up at her sometimes and see her weep.  
I understand now what was happening.  
Love so strong a force it broke the cage,  
And she disappeared from everything for a blessed moment.  
All actions have evolved from the taste of flight;  
The hope of freedom moves our cells and limbs.  
Unable to live on the earth, Mira ventured our alone in the sky---  
I write of that journey of becoming as free as God.