Maria Adoptrix

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Mary has a way of accruing titles. In the New Testament she is simply "the mother of Jesus," but doctrine and piety have amplified this simplicity, giving rise to a full-blown controversy over her title *Theotokos*, "God-bearer," affirmed at the Council of Ephesus in 431. She has been called *Hodegetria* ("she who shows the way"), *Sedes Sapientiae* ("throne of wisdom"), and Mother of Sorrows. The Book of Concord variously calls her "the blessed Mary" (AP XXI.27), "the blessed Virgin Mary" (AC III.1–2), "the pure, holy Virgin Mary" (SA I.4), and "the mother of God" (EP VIII.7). The Formula of Concord asserts Mary's central christological importance: it is intolerable to deny that Jesus received his body and blood from her (EP XII.1), and it must be confessed that the personal union of the two natures is unique to "the Son of Mary" (SD VIII).

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In art and adulation, the most important image of Mary is as mother, *the* mother, the one who bore in her own body the savior. As pregnancy and childbirth have been the defining reality for most of the female sex, and the love of a mother the first interpersonal experience of most of the human race, it is no surprise that Mary as mother to the infant Jesus has become one of the most beloved and widespread images in Christendom. Its intuitive testimony to the true bodily incarnation of Jesus has only served to strengthen the universal icon.

And yet, as so often happens, the overwhelming affirmation of one truth quietly and inadvertantly obscures another. Mary is indeed a biological mother of the most remarkable kind. But she is also an adoptive mother, and in so being she forms the bridge between the life of Jesus and the life of the church.

When Mary learns from the angel that she is to bear her firstborn child, she carries the news to cousin Elizabeth and sings a Magnificat of praise. Her song is not a wholly original creation, modeled as it is after one of the foremothers of Israel, Hannah, mother to the prophet Samuel. Together they sing of miraculous and unexpected conceptions in fitting parallel (I Samuel 2:1–10, Luke 2:46–55). But this is not the two women's only similarity. Both Hannah and Mary are also relinquishing mothers: mothers who have to place their children in the hands of another.

Hannah's relinquishment came quite a bit earlier in the child's life than Mary's. She had already dedicated the as-yet nonexistent Samuel to the Lord during her temple prayers for deliverance from barrenness. Until Samuel was weaned, Hannah declined to join her husband Elkanah on his yearly visits to the temple, putting it off until the one visit that would take Samuel from her forever. The grief must have been immense, and all the more grievous on hearing reports of Eli's unsuitability as a foster father, his biological sons running amok and incurring the Lord's wrath. But she fulfilled her vow all the same: "For this child I prayed, and the Lord has granted me my petition that I made to Him. Therefore I have lent him to the Lord. As long as he lives, he is lent to the Lord" (I Samuel 1:27–28). It was not only his specially granted conception that made him so; firstborn sons had always been sacred to the LORD: "The firstborn of your sons you shall give to Me" (Exodus 22:29b). So Hannah fittingly named her child "I have asked for him from the Lord"—the literal meaning of "Samuel"—but the Lord asked for him back again.

Mary likewise had to hand over her firstborn son, her

always preexistent Son, to his heavenly Father. The first foretaste was that terrible trip out of Jerusalem when the twelve-year-old Jesus went missing. That was when Mary saw beyond any hope of a doubt that the Father would make his claim against the best hopes of the mother and draw her son, His Son, to the cross.

But neither mother was left without consolation, as happened also with Job's restoration (42:13–16) and the birth of Seth to Eve after the murder of Abel (Genesis 4:25)—even if one child can never substitute for another. After Samuel, the Lord granted Hannah three more sons and two daughters (II Samuel 2:21). By all scriptural accounts, Mary's firstborn was not her only child, either. Luther along with many of the church fathers professed Mary's perpetual virginity, but the original impetus of the teaching was to assert that Mary had been physically unharmed by the trauma of childbirth—not only her hymen but her entire body still intact—just as the Father was not damaged by the eternal generation of the Son. Sexual relations with Joseph were a secondary matter.[1]

In any event, Matthew 13:55 rattles off Jesus' family members in a very traditional order: "Is not this the carpenter's son? Is not his mother called Mary? And are not his brothers James and Joseph and Simon and Judas?" The parallel in Mark 6:3 adds unnamed "sisters," a term less likely to refer to generic women in the family than the more pliable term "brothers"—though the etymology of the Greek *adelphos* is "from the same womb." If it were important to stress that Jesus was Mary's only son as well as God's only Son, it is strange no care would have been taken by any of the Evangelists or by Paul to clarify that these were more distant kinsmen rather than brothers.[2]

But to Mary, unlike to Hannah, another kind of motherhood was granted as well. This is the adoptive motherhood that took place at the foot of the cross. In John's telling, among Jesus' final words were his charge to Mary and his beloved disciple: "Woman, behold, your son… Behold, your mother!" (John 19:26–27). That it came so late in the lives of both in no way invalidates the adoption; the words of the Lord cannot be contradicted by mere age, as Sarah's and Elizabeth's conceptions had proven. For the Son's sonship has a meaning and consequence beyond the biological, even within the horizontal plane of the human family, however distressing it may be to the womb that bore him and the breasts that nursed him (Luke 11:27). If the Christ's outstretched arms are going to draw in all the nations, then blood can no longer be the tie that binds. Or rather, it is only the blood of the crucified, poured out in the Supper celebrated by peoples of every clan and tribe and nation, that will bind anymore. Mary is the first to learn the grief of severing the old bonds of blood, but she is the first to learn the joy of the new family, the ecclesial family.

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Or, perhaps, she is the second. For Mary must have learned something about this new way of being family, through adoption, from Joseph. Jesus is not the heavenly Father's adopted Son, but he is certainly Joseph's adopted son. And Joseph is the most laudable of adoptive fathers, no analogue to Eli, believing an otherwise unbelievable story of his betrothed's pregnancy and caring for the child as his own, even to the extent of voluntary exile in Egypt. Matthew and Luke trace Jesus' genealogy to Abraham or God respectively through Joseph's line, even while adamantly insisting that Joseph played no role in Jesus' conception. This would make for a meaningless string of names were it not for the very point that adoption is as legitimately family as conception, a foretaste of the church to come. John's Gospel—the one Gospel to report the giving of Jesus' beloved disciple and Jesus' mother to one another—never once calls the mother by her name of Mary, but twice names Jesus as "the son of Joseph" (1:45, 6:42). Adoption forms families as real as any formed by nature, as Joseph well knew.

So the unnamed mother and the unnamed beloved disciple were put together by Jesus himself, bleeding to death on the cross, into a new adoptive family beyond the claims of blood. He disregarded any legitimate claims that his own brothers, Mary's own sons (John 7:5), might have made on her. Having done that, he knew that "all was now finished" (John 19:28). He was ready to die, because the seed had fallen into the ground. From this seed would sprout the church.

It's not John who takes up the topic at length, though, giving us as he does only this one powerful image of the mutually adoptive Mary and disciple. Paul is the one to do it instead.

He mentions Mary just once, and not by name. "But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons" (Galatians 4:4–5). In other words, Mary's biological birthgiving of Jesus was for the sake of the mass adoption of the sinful human race by God the Father. This sole reference to Mary in no way means that Paul disregards her particularly; only

that this proud son of Benjamin had come to recognize that, if He saw fit, God could raise children for Abraham from stones (Matthew 3:9; cf. Galatians 3:7), every bit as much as He could raise apostles from enemies. Jews had no more advantage over Gentiles, for "if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise" (Galatians 3:29). Paul had to stop telling the story of birth and lineage so he could start telling the story of new birth and adoption.

So after mentioning the savior's mother, he continues: "And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!'" (Galatians 4:6). It is in this divine adoption that we best know and experience the deepest mystery of God, that He is Trinity: the Father sending the Spirit of the Son into our hearts. And this adoption so upends the conventional order that even Paul, unmarried man that he is, can become a laboring mother like Mary, "in the anguish of childbirth until Christ is formed in you" (Galatians 4:19). Just as every Gentile Christian is an adopted child of Israel, and just as every believer in Christ is an adopted child of God, so also is every Christian called to be an adoptive mother, laboring to bring forth Christ in others.

"Adoptionism," as it is regrettably known, became one of the earliest christological heresies, supposing that Jesus became divine or was claimed by the Father only at his baptism and no earlier. The name is unfortunate, because it casts a cloud of suspicion over any talk of adoption—which the legal and cultural processes of adoption also suffer in our world and have for centuries. It is as hard to believe in the new reality that is church, beyond claims of race and nation, as it is to believe in the true family-ness of adoptive families.

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But the "adoptionism" wrongly attributed to Jesus is rightly attributed to the church. In these latter days, all the peoples of the world—not in themselves holy—have been claimed by the Spirit to become daughters and sons of the Father. Blood and nation, family and lineage can be offered up to Christ, can be accepted by God, so long as they do not erect again the "dividing wall of hostility" that Christ broke down in his flesh (Ephesians 2:14). Good and necessary in their place, they must give way before the crucial claim of mutual adoption through the new birth that is baptism. Believers of all nations must learn to receive their foreign, unrelated brothers and sisters, just as Mary and the beloved disciple received one another at the foot of the cross.

This is no easy task. It contravenes every natural instinct of loyalty and exposes the fraudulent posing of the penultimate to be ultimate. But there is one who can lead the way, one who loved tenderly her own flesh and blood but nevertheless followed the way of the new creation in the Spirit instead. Her we name with reverence and affection *Maria Adoptrix*, Mary the Adoptive Mother. LF

Notes

1. See Sarah Jane Boss, *Mary* (London: Continuum, 2003), in the chapter on "Godlike Virginity."

2. See also the parallels in Matthew 12:46–50, Mark 3:31–35, and Luke 8:19–21; John 2:12 and the beginning of ch. 7, especially 7:5, "For not even his brothers believed in him"; Acts 1:14; Galatians 1:19 and 1 Corinthians 9:5.