THE MOTHERHOOD OF GOD: A SYMBOL FOR PASTORAL CARE

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Introduction

The theological foundation of pastoral care can be approached from many different starting points, any of them marking the distinction between pastoral care and secular helping services. I have decided to deal here with a focus on the importance of symbols as tools for doing theology, particularly related to the doctrine of God, and I will illustrate this importance with a symbol of God that has great meaning for me, showing the effects of this symbol in three areas related to pastoral care: 1) the self-understanding of the minister; 2) clinical application; and, 3) the prophetic function of pastoral care.

This paper will not attempt to give an overview of the function of symbols or a comprehensive look at pastoral care, but it will, hopefully, stimulate new questions and insights about the relation between the two. My narrowed focus has advantages and disadvantages. I hope that the paper will illustrate a method that will take on different appearances as other persons fill in the framework with content from their own lives. For me, theology must be derived from life experiences, and without such a base it will not speak to the concerns of pastoral care: communicating the presence of God to bring about 1) hope and comfort in times of crisis, 2) personal depth and understanding, and 3) meaningful relatedness to a community of others. Each minister must explore the theological foundations of her or his own ministry and then look at the ways in which that base is communicated through symbols in the doing of pastoral care. What follows is an account of my learnings through that process.

The process became a conscious one for me when I was asked to write on some image on which I base my ministry. I reflected on the development of my commitment to ministry, and I noticed the profound effect that being female has had in the shaping of my understanding of "service." And yet in terms of femininity connoted to me, at this point in my life, a woman "in her place," carrying out the wishes of a God whom I had grown up to image in male terms. While the scene was familiar, it discounted much of my experience as a woman. And so I did something that was very daring for me, coming

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out of a fundamentalist background; I experimented with a new way of thinking of God. My feelings went through a progression: first scare, then awkwardness, relief, and finally closeness. I was experiencing the power of a new symbol, the motherhood of God. From that experience, I have come to believe in the importance of symbols for our own lives as ministers, as well as in our work with others. Experience, then is at the heart of my method.

The importance of symbols is a subject that has been developed to great depth in recent scholarship.[1] Symbols are the most basic tools by which we conceptualize God, the bridges between experience and reflection. Word-symbols, or language, are thought by some anthropologists to necessarily precede thought. In theology, words like "king" or "creator" are representations of functions and attributes of God. But their power does not end there. Tillich describes, in his Systematic Theology, a second direction in symbolism.[2] For the quality which is used to describe God is implicitly being described itself, as being capable of participating in God. I would add a third direction: the power of symbols of God to point toward the future by shaping expectation around what God is like as well as reinforcing cultural biases. This paper will deal indirectly with all three of these directions: the description of God, the participation of qualities in Godhood, and the power of symbols of God to shape the future. The organization of the paper is to present the symbol of the motherhood of God, and to follow it through its various functions for the minister doing pastoral care.

A Symbol: The Motherhood of God

The symbol of God as mother is clearly a complement to a symbol which has been very influential in the Judaeo-Christian tradition, God as father. Coming out of a culture which basically concerned women to be the property of men, God was described primarily in male terms. That is to say, God was described in symbols of power. (There are some important exceptions to this.[3]) The symbols included pronouns as well as images from the culture, such as father, lord, and king. In the history of the church, the tradition has been carried on, with God depicted as male at the heart of Christendom, the walls of the Sistine chapel of the Vatican. Part of the Roman Catholic

[1]See especially Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil* (New York: Harper and and Row, 1967).

[2]Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology* I (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press,, 1971), p. 240.

[3]Isaiah 46:3 and 49:15 are examples of God's devotion being compared to a mother's love, with images of birthing and nursing. To assert that God was pictured as equally masculine and feminine in the Bible would require a substantial amount of "hermeneutical ventriloquism."

opposition to ordaining women is that the priest must represent God in the Mass, and that could not be done by a woman. And children learn to address God as "he" long before their minds can grasp the idea of a genderless reality.

Now the image of God as father has been the source of comfort, direction, and structure in the faith of both Jewish and Christian believers. This symbol has included dimensions not only of power, but also other qualities which have at times been identified by the culture as "feminine." For example, God is portrayed as the patient parent waiting for his wayward son, then welcoming him home with open arms. And Jesus called him "Abba" ("Dad"), implying an intimacy possible only in a close, nurturing relationship. The symbol of father, then, is rich and relevant, or it would not have been so meaningful to so many for so long. And beyond what it describes about God, it points to that in fathering and in maleness which participates in God. And so generation after generation has related to God out of symbols which link God to maleness, and which, in turn, link maleness to God.

But the symbols of the Bible and of our tradition are not graven images. They function to describe for us what God is like. And so it is possible—and even necessary—to develop new symbols to complement the old, new symbols which add a fullness to our ways of understanding and communicating the qualities which we believe describe God.

What does it mean to speak of the motherhood of God? For me, and for many women, symbolizing God as mother enriches our experience of God. For each individual, the associations will be different; that is the richness of symbols. But there are six interrelated functions of motherhood which can help to describe the God of our tradition in fresh images. Mothering means 1) sexuality; 2) birthing; 3) nurturing; 4) guidance; 5) letting go; and, 6) continuing bond.

God is symbolized in the sexuality implicit in being a mother. And with the image of sexuality are images of love, intimacy and joy. There is openness and vulnerability, as well as ecstasy and abandon. We have been so afraid to include God in this area of our lives, as if it was somehow not part of who she is. The sterility of our symbolism has been an outgrowth of the classical split between body and spirit. It is time to integrate sexuality into our understanding of God.[4]

[4]*Embodiment: An Approach to Sexuality and Christian Theology* by James Nelson is an excellent study of the possibilities which we have ignored in our discomfort with our own sexuality, possibilities for relating our understanding of God to our total being. Also, see Margaret A. Farley's "Sources of Sexual Inequality in the History of Christian Thought," in the *Journal of Religion* Vol.56, no.2 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1976), pp.162-176.

God gave birth to creation. In doing so, she endured the pain of creativity. Sometimes she was sorry that she had ever created, but her basic affirmation is, "That's good." Our existence becomes a part of the definition of God. That is, God is creator because creation exists, even as motherhood, in a biological sense, is defined by birthing. Creation came from out of God, from who she is. And we, as part of that creation, carry her image.

On a primal level, we experience our dependence on God as an infant is dependent on the nurturing mother. Whither can we go from her spirit? She is our whole world. She provides us the sustenance, from out of herself, by which we grow. She is gentle with us in our frailty, compassionate in our distress, delighted in our pleasure, and encouraging in our growth. "As one whom his mother comforts, so I will comfort you." (RSV, Isaiah 66:13).

With mothering comes a responsibility to guide a new person into a life of fulfillment and meaning. In the judgement of God we experience her setting boundaries for our living. These boundaries become the structure by which we identify ourselves as a part of, but not the whole creation. They become ordering principles for our lives, but principles learned only with mistakes along the way. Through laws of nature as well as Torah and New Testament teachings, we experience God's guidance, instruction, and judgement, in tough love.

But mothering includes more than care and presence. It also means letting go of the child. In God, we have the freedom to change, freedom to grow and to fail. Jesus expressed this part of the nature of God in his regret, "How often would I have gathered your children as a hen gathers her brood under her wings . . ." (RSV, Matthew 23:37). In balance with her nurturing, God is willing to let go, to recognize limits, to appreciate the necessity of choice, be it to healthy or destructive ends. This is perhaps the most difficult part of mothering, and it is described only through paradox.

Paradoxical to letting go is the continual bond in the mother-child relationship. In this quality are the steadfastness, stability, and acceptance which are bedrock to the Christian faith. God's grace prevails, even when we have left her, even in the face of our sin. There are few images in our own life experiences which carry the impact of the mother who remains faithful to her child, even after the child has grown and left the teaching of home. This subject has been a recurring theme of story and art in our culture, and it is a potent symbol of God's faithfulness to us, her children.

Application of the Motherhood of God in Pastoral Care

A) PERSONAL UNDERSTANDING OF THE PASTORAL HELPER.

Symbols of God provide diagnostic tools for furthering the understanding which the minister has of his or her own development, strengths and insights, as well as limits and growing edges. Without such an understanding the minister has debilitating blind spots, the result of defenses against incongruency in self-concept and actual life situations. Feeling responses to symbols of God are one way for the minister to discover and identify some of the issues which may lie hidden beneath intellectual acceptance. Jung deals with this way of understanding ourselves with his work on the shadow side, saying that we recognizze our own shadow qualities in those parts of other persons which elicit strong emotional responses from us.[5] And so the question which the minister can bring to new symbols of God is "How do I respond to this new image, and why?" A look at a response to the symbol of the motherhood of God will illustrate.

Any symbol which involves gender touches on issues of sexuality, and brings closer to the surface deeply engrained and often troublesome questions about our own sexuality. This shows up blatantly in such attitudes as homophobia, sex-role stereotyping, chauvinism, promiscuity, and taboos. But the questions may be covered over by thin intellectual arguments. (The observer can only guess when this is happening; to say more is to fall into the classic arrogance of assuming the presence of a feeling by the absence of its expression.) The following account illustrates the masquerade of fear behind a rigid insistence upon tradition. The rigidity protects the individual from having to look deeper and/or change.

> The scene is a theology class, 1980. The topic of discussion is theology and pastoral care. The model of the motherhood of God is presented, with emphasis on the importance of symbols in pastoral care, and the use of this particular symbol as one way to to speak of God. But for some class members, the discussion never goes beyond the shock of the symbol. This symbol is blasphemous, and they find scripture verses to spport their position that God was known to Jesus as male. Another person speaks up to say that since God has no gender, why is this motherhood symbol necessary? It is only an extension of women's liberation, creeping

[5]Carl Jung, *Psychology and Religion: West and East,* Trans. by R.F.C. Hull, Vol. 11 in *The Collected Works oy C.G. Jung* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1958), p.83.

into theology. And besides, it is annoying and inconvenient to to try to refer to either persons or God with inclusive language. The arguments continue on an intellectual level that belies the emotional investment of the speakers. But the discussion is cut through in one statement by a woman who penetrates to where the real issue is. "I can't believe that in a class dealing with pastoral care, you are talking about a symbol of my self-worth in terms of your convenience."

It is in our discomfort that we may learn the most about ourselves. Why does it feel wrong to speak of God in feminine imagery? The link between maleness and power is built into the fabric of our culture, and it is a part of every one of us. For the minister, it is a myth which will interfere with his or her ministry and personal life. To recognize the wholeness of God, the maleness and femaleness of God, is to face the maleness and femaleness in ourselves. For we are made in the image of God. Perhaps there is some relationship between our narrow understanding of ourselves sexually and our reluctance to know the fullness of God.

B) PROFESSIONAL EFFECTIVENESS.

The symbols chosen to speak of God are of critical importance in the work of pastoral care. It is vital that the minister be aware of the effects of symbols, so that they are used consciously and carefully. The symbol of the motherhood of God, for example, is potent in at least four ways:

1) Many, if not most, of the situations in which pastoral care is involved are directly related to issues of intimacy, nurturing, judgement, and stability. Images of God which explicitly or implicitly relate to these issues touch persons at the core of their struggle. The motherhood of God is not, of course, the only image which speaks to these situations. Rather, it is one more way to try to put words to the ineffable, to make concrete the abstract, to make personal the transcendent. When pain is deep, when the despair is felt in the core of living, our symbols of God must be equally central to our experience. They must come from the earliest, most basic experiences of our lives. Being mothered is such an experience.

2) And so, not only do the life situations of pastoral care call for the understanding of God as mother, we as individuals respond to that symbol on a personal basis. This is the second application in pastoral care. For women and girls, there is a sense of identification that is

not possible with the image of God in exclusively male terms. And for men and boys, there is a calling forth of the culturally-defined female part of their nature. (Is there not a significant correlation between our exclusive images of God and a reluctance on the part of men to love the femininity within themselves?) But for persons of both genders, there is the strong identification of their experiences with their own mothers, evoking primal responses that hearken back to the first level of epigenetic development, learning to trust.

3) Third, the motherhood symbol described above is obviously relevant to the frequent issues around sexuality or parenthood which troubled persons bring to ministers. Sexuality is often considered inappropriate or at least awkward as a topic in pastoral care, though it is certainly a pervasive theme of our culture. And so, relating God to sexuality is an important step in helping persons bring their whole selves for healing. Likewise, our changing familial patterns have created new issues in parenting, issues arising out of a climbing divorce rate, mobile carrer patterns, and longer life expectancy. An image of God which addresses the mother-child relationship may speak directly and powerfully to many of the questions and burdens which have become part of modern life. Or it may reach a person who is blocked by the fatherhood image, as in the following case:

> A year following her abortion, a young woman is unable to accept God's acceptance of herself. When she can think of God in female symbols, God becomes distinct from her father (a federal judge) and she experiences reconciliation in grace.

4) Finally, pastoral care with women is concerned over and over again with feelings of worthiness and inferiority. And in work with marriages, an issue is often the dominance of the man as a God-ordained "head of the house." The symbol of God as mother witnesses to something holy as intrinsic to being female. This does not mean that being female is somehow holier than being male. But it does mean that femaleness, like maleness, participates in and derives from God. In a culture where femininity has a long-held association with weakness and inferiority, this emphasis is a crucial corrective.

Symbols need not always be interpreted. In fact, often a metaphor is best left to do its work out of conscious awareness. And so the minister must intentionally and carefully choose which metaphors to use. Something as simple as the name used to address deity in a prayer may have great significance to a person who is searching for

God. Or it may effect a person's search for him/herself, as in the following case:

> Jane is a forty-five old divorced woman who has been hospitalized repeatedly for depression. After seeing her for nine months in pastoral counseling, I asked her to pray for one week, imaging God in female terms. The next week, when asked about the experience, she replies that it semed like a crazy thing to do. "But I did it; I kept trying it. And after awhile it didn't seem quite as strange. (She pauses.) I don't know how this is related, but I've been feeling a whole lot better about myself this week, about myself as a woman. I've been taking better care of myself . . ." She goes on to describe her increased self-esteem, and I do not allude to the praying again.

Prophetic Function of Pastoral Care

"Why does everyone think that God is a boy?" My five-year-old friend and I talked about her question and decided that some people just have the wrong idea about God. But the question did not come out of a child's confusion. When asked if she thought of God as male, one minister's wife answered, "Yes! The Bible says He is!", echoing the response of many of her peers.[6] She was not deliberately choosing a narrow understanding of God. But she never was able to go beyond the teachings of her culture, teachings about which children learn in so many ways: through myths, family structures, worship, schooling, career preparation, and symbols.

Breaking through any prejudices or cultural biases is difficult. Confronting the prejudicial notion of a male God is a painful venture, and it is one which the pastoral helper may hesitate to take on. Why stir up the waters as a prophet, when the priestly task is to bring comfort? But pastoral care requires just such an integration of prophetic and priestly roles, because the issues with which the minister is dealing reflects the shortcomings of the culture. It is in the face of those cultural problems that he or she comes as a comforter.[7]

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[6]In a study done in 1978 (unpublished, K. Clark and S.H. Meeks), 77.8% of women married to Southern Baptist ministers in Colorado said they think of God as male. Of the total group, 22.2% said they consider themselves "powerful," but 0% answered that they did not consider their husbands more powerful than they.

[7]Paul Pruyser points to this area in *The Minister as Diagnostician,* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976), encouraging clergy not to abandon the richness of their theological language and concepts in clinical situations. And Don Browning, in *The Moral Context of Pastoral Care* (Philadephia: Westminster Press, 1976) calls clergy to remain faithful to a heritage of moral perspectives on life crises and decisions. These works lay groundwork for my point on the prophetic function of pastoral care, bringing God into situations of cultural significance.

The use of symbols of God is one way in which these roles of priest and prophet come together. To describe any subject in terms of a quality is to say something about both the subject and the quality. There is a relationship between the two, a connection. And so black men have been described as "boys", a verification of the power of symbols. (Somehow, "black" and "man" was not a comfortable pairing, because blackness was not considered worthy of participating in manhood.) So to use in pastoral care a symbol of God which relates the quality of femaleness to God is to make a powerful statement about femaleness, as well as to describe God. But even as the feelings about the subject and the modifier point to each other, they both point forward in a third direction. That is, the way we describe a subject shapes our expectations of the future. We will tend to find confirmation of the qualities which we ascribe to the subject. For example, to say that God is king makes a statement about what God is like, but it also says that there is that in kingdom which is worthy of participating in God. And, in addition, it gives a category by which we may conceptualize our future experiences of God. Our symbols of God, then, reflect both our experiences of God and our experiences of our culture, and our symbols shape both of these as well. The symbol of the motherhood of God, used in pastoral care, shapes the expectations of individuals who then shape the culture. An awareness of the participation of femaleness in God attunes the culture to the possibilities of women for contributing to their fullest potential within the culture.[8]

Tillich describes a "sublime embarrassment" with which we must speak of God.[9] Naming the ineffable must always be uncomfortable. What shall we say, then, about the comfort with which we speak of God in male terms? We have abandoned fidelity to the mystery, choosing instead a culturally comfortable but faithless packaging of God. To break out of that form is to go beyond the prescriptions of the culture. It is to assert the leadership of our faith, the priority of our

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[8]The Catholic veneration of Mary the mother of God certainly has had an impact on the place of women within culture. But it has had a tendency to divide the attributes of God into two groups, with Mary as the nurturing, gentle intercessor, persuading God the judging father to have pity on his children. The result has been a division among objects of worship which has approached polytheism. The question remains as to why it has been necessary to keep separate from God those qualities ascribed to Mary. But the culture is only now becoming ready to accept the participation of femaleness in Godhood. This illustrates the small steps in which symbols interact with culture, each part of the three-directional process moving individually but keeping abreast with the other parts, with cause and effect intertwined among them.

[9]Paul Tillich, "The Divine Name," a sermon in *The Eternal Now* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1963), pp.92-100.

faith over confines of our culture.[10] And it is to participate in the message of value and worth to a group of persons who have been individually and systemically discounted.

Some Difficulties to be Faced

We run into problems when we speak of God, for God is beyond our grasp. Two of the most obvious problems are inherent in the anthropomorphic nature of our symbols of God, and more specifically, in gender-related symbols. And yet the difficulties are part of a greater good: the enrichment of our understanding and experience of God.

Religion has long been criticized as primitive superstition that must put a face on anything that is presently unknown– and a suspiciously human-like face at that. And it is true that we speak of God, and think of God, in highly-developed anthropomorphic language. This is both a severe limitation and a powerful means of experiencing God. The limitation is present in our tendency to turn "God is like. . ." into "God is . . . .", to make graven images of our myths. We create a god for ourselves whom we can control, for naming is an important step toward managing. And so we experience relief in our naming of God.

There are many times in the course of pastoral care when such relief is essential before a person can go on into new learning. Furthermore, the faces we give to god are often more powerful than corresponding words such as "good" or "just." Our task as carriers of myth is to keep the symbols potent but never rigid, knowing that persons in need, including ourselves, may confuse rigidity with security.

This paper has argued particularly for the inclusion of a feminine image of God in pastoral care. Theology must reflect the struggle of society if it is to be relevant, and that struggle is particularly critical in the area of pastoral care. For the society is only a magnified reflection of the struggle within individuals, the struggle to claim all of who we are in our androgeny and know that we are made in God's likeness. The motherhood of God, alongside the fatherhood of God, affirms the feminine within our society, as well as within every one of us, men and women alike. We will know that we no longer need to image God in female terms when we are no longer shocked or insulted by the idea.

Nevertheless, there is a major limit to any symbol which is linked

[10]The reader may wish to sharpen her or his own understanding of the relationship of symbols to culture using the categories put forth by H. Richard Niebuhr in *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper and Row, 1951).

to gender because of the participation of that symbol in cultural prejudices and stereotypes that may be oppressive or restrictive. Excluding a few biological functions, all characteristics are a part of the make-up of both sexes, though certainly we as individuals learn from our context which ways of being will help us get along in life. The problem with avoiding gender altogether in our God-talk is that we are unable to relate personally to "it" as readily as we can to "he" or "she." That is a limitation of being human. But we can include in our male images features of nurturing and gentleness, and in our female images power and judgement. Our symbols may thus increasingly invite us to accept the mix of who we are. Rather than mirrors of the cultural biases, they may be iconoclasts, breaking the old images, making room for the new expressions of what it means to be human, and what it means to be made in the image of God.