

A MOTHER'S LOVE

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During the recent summer Olympics in London, the multinational company Proctor & Gamble ran a series of television commercials featuring the mothers of Olympic athletes. The aim was to honor moms and all that they do to help their children succeed.

The leading commercial opened with a Chinese mother in a big city gently waking her little girl early in the morning: “Hi sweetie, it’s time to wake up,” she says. We then see identical scenes in suburban America, in an Afro-English home in working-class England, and in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. “C’mon, I’ll make you breakfast,” says the Brazilian mom to her young son while the background music fills the viewer with a sense of anticipation and the sun rises over the bay of Rio.

In the next scene the moms are tenderly preparing different national breakfasts for their children: Chinese dumplings, toast and beans, fried plantains, cereal. Mom serves breakfast and then sits down to watch with delight as her child happily eats.

Now it is time to go to practice. Mother and child leave the house together to catch the bus, the subway, or load the minivan, sometimes braving the pouring rain. Mom is ever attentive, holding the child’s hand, helping him or her on and off. She is careful and gentle.

Now we are at practice: One child is swimming, one is playing volleyball, one is in track and field, and another is on the balance beam. Whatever sport, the moms are all engaged in the same thing with the same attitude—looking on attentively, watching,



MARY CASSATT - BREAKFAST IN BED

smiling, guiding, becoming experts in a sport in which otherwise they would have no interest if not for their child.

What comes next is a review in rapid succession of all the previous scenes of mom and child. The music picks up, seemingly to carry both mother and child forward, uniting them from two different points of view in a common endeavor—the child's life, success, and happiness. Now mom is helping and guiding, now doing the laundry, now watching and playing with her child, now folding and straightening. Day after day, the same dedication, the same commitment—the child to his or her passion and the mother to her child. We see mom at home behind the scenes—washing the dishes, fixing the bed—while the children are at practice or at school. No one sees her, nobody congratulates her or gives her a medal—nor does she want one. What gives mom satisfaction is seeing to her child's needs, giving him a piece of fruit, taking her

where she needs to go, or watching her sleep peacefully and safely while mom looks on in the rearview mirror, attentive, thoughtful, anticipating.

Fast-forward. The children are quickly growing up and competing in tournaments. We see mom cheering vigorously from the stands. Whether it is swimming, track and field, volleyball, or gymnastics there's mom bandaging a foot, consoling after a defeat, helping to pick up the pieces when dreams crumble. Each time we see mom she is full of emotion—anxiety, joy, focus, optimism, and always lots of love, unconditional love. It is the same for each mom, day after day, year after year, as her “baby” grows up and flourishes in manhood and womanhood.

The final scene has us at the Olympic games: the culmination of thousands of hours and dollars, sacrifice, sweat and toil impossible to quantify. The crowds are huge, the hometown is glued to the TV, the stakes are high, all eyes are on our athletes and nobody feels the pressure more than the biggest fan—mom, watching with baited breath. The commercial ends on a cathartic note: The child wins the race, sticks the landing, wins match point, and touches the wall of the pool first. Competitive exultation turns into profound gratitude as one adult child runs to the stands to embrace mom, one blows kisses from his knees, and another waves from the pool while mom's eyes overflow with tears, hands over her mouth and inexpressible joy on her face. The children know they did not make this journey alone, that none of it would have been possible without the encouragement, support and sacrifice of mom every step of the way.

After a mere two minutes of these powerful, rapid, images, the picture gives way to a message in stark black on white: “The hardest job in the world, is the best job in the world. Thank you, Mom.”

Indeed, where would we be without our moms? Nobody comes into this world without a mother and our healthy development and happiness as human beings depends in large part on the maternal care and love that we have received from our moms. It is hard to imagine a greater responsibility than that of motherhood, one

that requires more goodness and virtue, one more worthy of more respect and devotion.

A CALL TO SUPERNATURAL LIFE

What is true of our natural life is also true of our spiritual life. What our earthly mothers are to our natural life, the Blessed Virgin Mary is to our supernatural life. Indeed, as Christians we do not call the most holy Mother of God our mother in a merely metaphorical sense: Precisely because she is the mother of Jesus Christ, Word Incarnate and Redeemer of the human race, she is truly our mother too. It was in view of her being the Mother of God and men that God outfitted her, so to speak, with the plenitude of grace unique to her.

To appreciate the wonderful reality of the supernatural life and Mary's role in it let us recall a basic truth of the Christian faith, namely, that we are all called to something that outstrips our present reality in fulfillment, beauty, happiness, and love innumerable times over. This supreme calling excludes every frustration, disappointment and sorrow, for it is nothing less than a share in God's eternal bliss—the supernatural life. The theological placeholder in Christian language for this reality is "Beatitude."

Describing this reality as a divine call, Blessed John Paul the II wrote in *Evangelium Vitae*:

Man is called to a fullness of life which far exceeds the dimensions of his earthly existence, because it consists in sharing the very life of God. The loftiness of this supernatural vocation reveals the greatness and the inestimable value of human life even in its temporal phase (EV 2).

The promise of divine life will reach its full realization in eternity. For this reason we should not think of life on earth as an "ultimate" reality but as a "penultimate" reality.

This point is worth stressing: The human person, because of his rational nature, is more than a thousand times above the world of animals. However, his Christian dignity, considered strictly supernaturally, is more than a thousand times above his human dignity, considered purely at the level of nature. By grace, man is elevated and bears the stamp of divinity. He has received a mysterious but real participation in God's nature, which truly makes him his son by a kind of intrinsic adoption and not a merely juridical and extrinsic one. By the divine adoption of grace, we can say, in effect, that in the veins of a Christian runs the very blood of God. As long as the Christian remains in that state he is heir to heaven by right, as St. Paul says (Rm 8:17). His dignity is such that it incommensurably surpasses the entire creation, including angelic nature as such. For this reason, St. Thomas Aquinas affirms without hesitation that "the good of grace in one [person] is greater than the good of nature in the whole universe" (*STh* I-II, q. 113, a. 9, ad 2).

"YOU WERE PURCHASED AT THE PRICE OF HIS BLOOD."

This unimaginable gift of divine life is not something we could have purchased ourselves: It is given to us as a gift of the divine goodness. And yet, it did have to be purchased—at no less a price than the blood of Jesus Christ, the Word Incarnate and Son of the Father. The Father has given all things to Christ and no one is redeemed and given the divine life without the redeeming sacrifice of Christ being applied to them, including the Immaculate and Blessed Virgin Mary, his mother.

The declaration *Dominus Iesus* succinctly sums up the Catholic conviction and attitude:

It must be *firmly believed* as a truth of Catholic faith that the universal salvific will of the One and Triune God is offered and accomplished once and for all in the mystery of

the incarnation, death, and resurrection of the Son of God (*DI* 14).

God did not have to redeem man this way, but he did. In the actual state of affairs the Divine Wisdom ordained that the eternal Word would take the flesh of a woman and be born and grow up under the maternal care of a mother, just like you, me, and the Olympic athletes. Therefore, in the very same eternal decree of the Incarnation—the union of the human and divine natures in the Person of the Word—is included the woman of whom God would take flesh and be born, the one by whom he would be fed and cared for. That woman is Mary.

Her act of consent to the realization of the mystery of the Word made flesh, announced by the angel Gabriel, was given in the name of the human race. Further, in thus consenting, she consented likewise to that train of sufferings predicted by the Messianic prophecies.

IMAGE RESTORATION AND CONFORMITY TO CHRIST

A fundamental unity and solidarity exists between Christ and the whole human race. By his Incarnation, the Son of God has united himself, in some way, with every human being. There is, therefore, no one who is untouched by the mystery of the Word made flesh. Humanity, and indeed all creation, has been objectively changed by the very fact of the Incarnation and objectively saved by the suffering, death, and resurrection of Christ. God the Father wills to configure all human beings to Christ by the Holy Spirit, who transforms and empowers them by his grace. However, that objective salvation must be subjectively appropriated.

This highlights two other fundamental theological principles. First, because human beings, created in the image of God, have been given free will, each of us, moved by grace, must freely choose the gift of salvation offered to us by God in the death and

resurrection of his Son. As St. Augustine reminds us, "God created us without us: but he did not will to save us without us."

Secondly, we have been created in space and time. We do not possess our entire being all at once, but successively over time. Clearly, we are not born adults but grow into adulthood. As another Proctor & Gamble commercial has it, "They weren't born Olympians, they were raised that way." The same is true of the restoration of the image of God in us, the measure of which is our conformity to the image of Christ.

Now the process of recovery—and it is a process—may take a long time. Since becoming the image of God is a dynamic process rather than static state, we are always becoming more or less an image of God. The completion of the human person, the full realization of the destiny of each person is to become the image of God as he has wanted him to be from all eternity. In other words, the image of God—becoming the image of God—is the finality, the goal, of man. Man was created in order to be the image of God through knowing and loving him. And if the image, at least in the conditions of this life, is only realizable under the guidance of the virtues of faith, hope, and charity through grace, then, of course, faith, hope, and charity are central to the whole moral life, and the primary means for this configuration is the Church and her sacraments.

THE FIGHT AGAINST SIN

The concrete human person who is created in the image of God is always *in via*, always being drawn to the Father, but partly impeded by sin; one is redeemed by Christ, yet undergoing a lifelong transformation finally consummated in an eternal life of communion with the Blessed Trinity and the saints.

This process of development of the Christian life does not take place without a fight. Our enemy is sin and the battle takes place on three fronts, which tradition identifies as the world, the devil and

the flesh, that is, our own evil inclinations. The arduous process of our return to God involves a purification from sin in which we resolve to separate ourselves from anything that could separate us from God, from a growth in love and in the works of charity, and from a realignment of our will with God's.

This transformation takes place in the power of the Holy Spirit and its realization is possible only with divine grace. It has pleased the divine Wisdom to root the work of image-restoration and image-perfection in a specific plan which includes, in the first place, the sacramental structure of the Church. Included as well in this plan is the need for our free collaboration with it. While healing and liberation from sin are offered in the sacrament of reconciliation, one is always free to reject it. Beatific fellowship finds its anticipation in the Eucharist, but God does not force our love. Also included in this plan at every step of the way—from the Incarnation to the bestowing of grace for supernatural life—is the Blessed Virgin Mary.

MARY'S OFFICE IN OUR SANCTIFICATION

When God calls someone to an office He gives that person whatever he or she is going to need to carry out that office. To be the worthy Mother of God and of the Redeemer of the human race required nothing less than the fullness of grace. Mary was given every conceivable grace, even surpassing all the angels and saints combined, which is highly appropriate for someone so intimately and essentially a part of the divine plan of salvation.

Because Mary's divine maternity is ordered to the union in one person of the divine and human natures, and because this union, in turn, is ordered to the salvation of man, Mary is also intimately united to the redemptive work and mission of her Son. Jesus Christ, who has received all things from the Father and from whom comes our salvation and the promise of eternal life, has willed that the graces won for us at the price of his blood should pass through

the hands of a mother—his mother—the blessed and glorious and ever-virgin Mary.

Recall, now, what was said earlier, that what our earthly mothers are to our natural life, Mary is to our supernatural life. Mary's universal role in the mission of her son was clearly revealed by Christ precisely from the Cross: "When Jesus saw his mother, and the disciple whom he loved standing near, he said to his mother, 'Woman, behold your son!' Then he said to the disciple, 'Behold, your mother!' and from that hour the disciple took her to his own home" (Jn 19:26-27).

Mary is our mother because, just as our entrance into our natural life required a mother, so God has destined our entrance into supernatural life to come also through a mother. Mary is our mother because she, standing at the foot of the Cross, was intimately associated with the tremendous sacrifice of Christ the Redeemer. In the words of the *Stabat Mater*, the hymn sung before the Gospel on the feast of her seven sorrows, "At the Cross her station keeping, stood the mournful Mother weeping, close to her Son to the last. Through her heart, his sorrow sharing, all his bitter anguish bearing, now at length the sword has passed." Mary accompanies us because she first accompanied her Son.

Mary is our mother because, as St. Augustine says, Mary is the living mold of God. In her was the Man-God formed and in her alone can man be formed into the shape of God, taking on the shape of Jesus Christ. Mary is our mother because in her there was no gap between the real and the ideal, between her will and God's will. In her, human freedom finds its most perfect expression. Mary is our mother because she loves us with a perfect maternal love and nothing moves our human wills more freely or calls forth greater trust than love. Mary is our mother because of her constant fidelity and devotion to the well-being of our souls. None of us are born saints; we are "raised" that way by the careful and dedicated hand of a Mother. But most of all, Mary is our Mother because

God has ordained it so. “Indeed, she [Wisdom] reaches from end to end mightily and governs all things well” (Wis 8:1).

OUR RESPONSE: DEVOTION TO MARY

The word “devotion” comes from the Latin *de vovere*, which means to dedicate oneself readily to the active service of God. To have a Marian devotion is to dedicate ourselves fervently to Mary, our mother, and to her work, which has no other end than to make all of us live the mystery of Christ more intimately and profoundly. The most complete formula of this devotion is to Jesus through Mary. And just as our relationships with our earthly mothers should not be conceived in terms of how useful they are to us, so too an authentic devotion to Mary is one conceived not in terms of what she can do for us but in terms of what we can do to help her carry out her mission of Co-Redemptrix and Mediatrix, understood as subordinate to and essentially united with her Son, the one Redeemer and Mediator.

Because devotion is stirred up in us by meditating on God’s superabundant goodness and our own littleness and poverty, the best way to acquire, conserve, and develop a devotion to Mary is by prayerfully calling to mind what God has done in and through Mary. Mary herself showed us the way when she declared to her cousin Elizabeth, “My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord; my spirit rejoices in God my Savior” (Luke 1:46-47). In her *Magnificat*, Mary calls to mind what God, in his great mercy, has done in favor of his people, from Abraham to herself. Mary’s recollection of salvation history finds its natural expression in a hymn of praise to God. Catholics have “an embarrassment of riches,” as the Italians say, in their heritage of Marian devotions, literature, and art from which they can draw for the purpose of increasing devotion to the Mother of God.

Like the mothers in Proctor & Gamble’s commercial, whose daily humble and self-effacing dedication to the well-being of

their children takes place largely behind the scenes, so too is Mary's motherly intervention in our sanctification largely hidden and unobserved. Just as the place of a mother in the life of a child is crucial, so too do we Christians understand Mary's place as mother of our souls to be a gift of immeasurable value and a privilege beyond compare. This is the wisdom of God's holy will, and therefore in order to enter into the plan of God it is necessary to have a close relationship with and devotion to Mary. It is Mary who will lead us to her Son, Jesus, and who will trace in our souls the features of our configuration to him. It is this that constitutes the very essence of our sanctity and perfection.

Sancta Dei Genetrix, ora pro nobis.

Joseph Mary Hertzog entered the Order of Preachers in 2007.