



A MINISTRY SCHOOL OF THE ANGLICAN DIOCESE OF THE UPPER MIDWEST

Holy Mother Church: The Body and Bride of Christ

Deacon John C. Clark

*“When the Christian who knows what he is saying speaks of the church as his mother, he is not giving way to some sentimental impulse; he is expressing a reality.” ~Henri De Lubac, *The Motherhood of the Church**

I. The Church as the Body of Christ

Scripture is a wellspring of rich imagery, depicting the church as a vineyard, garden, city, nation, chosen race, family, and still more. But Scripture does not simply pour forth images for the church and leave us to construct abstract, arbitrary connections between them. One image integrates and qualifies/conditions all others: *the body of Christ*.

The term *body* is crucial because, unlike all other ecclesial images, it applies to both Christ and the church. In other words, it applies at once to three bodies: 1) the human body of God the Son incarnate; 2) the body of the church corporate, communal, and universal; and 3) our physical bodies, yours and mine.

The most real (head, source, archetype) of all bodies is the body that belongs now and forever to the Second Person of the Trinity. Our bodies, and the body of the church, are rightly discerned only in terms of Christ’s body, because his body includes—literally incorporates—our bodies into his own.

Christ’s body is both individual and communal, the body of one person intimately and essentially related to other persons, divine and human. Thus the mystery of the church as a divine-human reality. The church is not ambiguous or amorphous—a wraithlike, Gnostic phantasm. Nor can the church be reduced only to institutional, sociological, anthropological facets—to some mere human entity that stands in place of God, or worse, that stands between us and God.

*“Body of Christ is more than a metaphor for some intimate social dynamic between Christ and his church. It is an ontological reality, as Christ is ontologically real.” ~Simon Chan, *Liturgical Theology**



Scripture says the one-flesh union between Christ and his church is profound and profoundly real:

~Why are you persecuting me? (Acts 9:1-5)

~The church is [Greek: indeed, or in truth] Christ's body, the very fullness of him who fills all in all (Ephesians 1:23; cf. 1 Corinthians 12:27; Colossians 1:24).

II. Male and Female He Created Them...and Recreated Them

"Person" is not a universal category, as is deity and humanity (or church). When God created humanity, he started with our primal parents, a plurality of persons in one-flesh union—persons male and female, one but not the same (one humanity, one union, but not one person).

With the incarnation, God chose a Y chromosome for the express purpose of punctuating, redeeming, and glorifying forever the basic male/female binary structure of humanity as originally created—to recreate humanity male and female as he created them "very good" in the beginning. What is the significance of the male sexedness—indeed, the male sexuality—of our Lord Jesus Christ? Does it speak to the other half of the human equation—to woman?

"By embracing human nature, God the Son embraced the Virgin's womb. The Second Person of the Trinity swam in amniotic fluid, fed from an umbilical cord, traveled a vaginal canal, and fed at his mother's breast.... The point is this: Through the incarnation, God the Son embraced male and female sexuality to the core. He didn't sidestep human sexuality; rather, he embraced it fully. But we can say more. The incarnation shows us there is no male sexuality without female sexuality. We can't understand Jesus' sexuality [maleness] without also grasping Mary's sexuality [femaleness]. Yes, the incarnation reveals the goodness of our being biologically sexed, but it also underscores the interdependence and complementarity of being male and female." ~Todd Wilson, *Mere Sexuality*

III. The Church as Woman and Mother: Hearing the Voice of Scripture

Amid all the rich ecclesial imagery for the church in Scripture, feminine imagery is central and crucial.

First, these images beautifully accentuate the archetypically feminine character of the church, in that believers are conceived in her womb, nourished at her bosom (Word and Sacrament), and continually fortified by her care, comfort, and correction.

Second, these images highlight that the church's one-flesh union with Christ is humanizing and personalizing, in that the church is not an inanimate and impersonal *it*, but a living and lavishly loved *she* (the church is never/nowhere called *he*, as this moves against the entire narrative of Scripture, from Genesis to Revelation).



~Isaiah 53-54:1 (hymn of the Suffering Servant and the Barren Woman who gives birth to many children). See the apostolic interpretation of this text in Galatians 4:26. “The Jerusalem above...she is our mother” (immediately followed by Isaiah 54:1).

~2 Corinthians 11:2 (“I betrothed you to one husband, to present you as a pure virgin to Christ”).

~1 Peter 1:23-25 (The church in exile has “been born again, not of perishable seed [Greek: *sperma*] but of imperishable, through the living and abiding Word of God”).

~2 John 4, 13 (Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, and many others attest that the “dear lady” in verse four is an unspecified church in another city, and the “elect sister” in verse thirteen is the church in Ephesus, from which John writes).

~Ephesians 5:22-32 (The church is the bride of Christ in one-flesh union with him, such that he nourishes and cherishes her as his own body, because that’s precisely who and what she is).

~1 Corinthians 6:12-20 (Paul’s argument against sexual unholiness is that the bride of Christ is really and truly joined to Christ’s body, such that our bodies are for the Lord, just as his body is for us).

~In these latter two texts Paul roots the feminine nature of the church in Genesis 2: “A man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh” (Eph. 5:31; 1 Cor. 6:16).

IV. Hearing the Voice of Our Reformed Catholic Heritage

“The church is so obviously mother that this single word, *Mater*, suffices to designate her without ambiguity.” ~Cyprian, *On the Unity of the Church*

“The spouse of Christ brings forth sons spiritually for God.... He alone can have God as his Father who first has the church as his mother!” ~Origen, *Homilies on Leviticus*

“Because it is now our intention to discuss the visible church, let us learn even from the simple title ‘mother’ how useful, indeed how necessary, it is that we should know her. For there is no other way to enter into life unless this mother conceive us in her womb, give us birth, nourish us at her breast, and lastly, unless she keep us under her care and guidance... Our weakness does not allow us to be dismissed from her school until we have been pupils all our lives. Furthermore, away from her bosom one cannot hope for any forgiveness of sins or any salvation...” ~John Calvin, *Institutes*

At its biblical best, our Reformed Catholic heritage sums up the life of the church in the image of the mother who gives life and guides that life to slow yet steady maturity. The preaching of the Word, administering the sacraments, leading prayers and praise, teaching various disciplines: everything is



the action of the church conceiving and carrying to completion in the hearts of believers the gift of God which is Christ in us, and us in Christ.

What is more, in the economy of the gospel, our maturation is a move from childishness to true childlikeness. A childlike spirit [a second naivete] is to grow in us as we advance in years and penetrate deeper into the womb of holy mother church. In our natural life, each step toward adulthood is a step away from childhood toward decrepitude; but in our spiritual life, all progress is renewal.

V. The Church as the New Eve

Just as surely as Jesus is the new Adam (Romans 5:12-21; 1 Corinthians 15:20-23, 45-49), the church is the new Eve.

- The first Adam and Eve were together the image of God as explicitly male and female in the creation of all things. Jesus and the church are the new Adam and Eve, together the restored image of God as explicitly male and female in the renewal of all things.
- God caused a deep sleep to fall on the first Adam and from his opened side fashioned the first Eve. And God cause the deeper sleep of death to fall on the new Adam, from whose pierced side he fashioned the new Eve.
- The first Eve is the mother of all living—including Jesus—and the new Eve is the mother of all who are fully alive in Christ (Genesis 1:26-27; 2:18-23; 3:20; Ephesians 5:22-33).

“Adam prefigured Christ and Adam’s sleep represented the death of Christ, who had to die the sleep of death so that the church, true mother of the living, could come from the wound in his side.”
~Tertullian, *On the Soul*

VI. The Church as the New Mary

As the mother of our Lord, Mary made room in her body for Christ to be formed in her. What is true of Mary is to be true not only of the entire church, but also of every individual Christian as the church in miniature. The birth of Jesus in the womb of Mary is to be replicated as he is born in the womb of the church, and in the womb of the Christian’s soul. In other words, we are reborn in Christ in the womb of the church. And as we abide in Christ, we are called to open ourselves and make room for Christ to abide in us, so the one who no creature can contain may dwell and grow in us.

And just as the likes of Origen, Ambrose, and Augustine believed the church to be *mother*, they also believed her to be *virgin*.



“You to whom I am speaking, you are the members of Christ. Who has given birth to you? I hear the voice of your heart: it is the mother church, this holy, honored church who, like Mary, gives birth and is virgin.” ~Augustine, *Sermon 25*

The big idea here is that the only way to enter new life and the new humanity in Christ (the family of God) is through the baptismal font—that is, through the virgin uterus of holy mother church. And in this sense, all the church is called virgin—a people of true chastity in that:

- We are free from sin and death, from the promiscuous pursuit of self-constructed identities and moralities.
- We are free to pursue the priorities and ethics of the kingdom, empowered by the Spirit to seek God in all things, including our bodies.
- We are free to pursue fulfillment by walking the way of Christ in a life of faith, hope, and love, of repentance, renewal, and obedience.¹

¹ Tish Harrison Warren, “The Church Made Vagina Sculptures Long Before Nadia Bolz-Weber,” in *Christianity Today*, February 2019.