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Imagining a Different Path: Religious Education and the Pilgrimage of Motherhood

Abstract: Motherhood is a complex experience that can be transformative, offering women opportunities for personal enrichment and spiritual development. However, when women travel the path of motherhood, they find themselves at the confluence of many powerful streams of imagination. Besides imagined days of caring for the child, they may be influenced and burdened by the assumptions of western culture and Christian tradition, which often ignore the complexity of their experiences. A richly re-imagined religious education can fashion a context that can support and enliven women in their motherhood.

When women travel the path of motherhood they can find themselves at the confluence of many powerful streams of imagination. As the imagined days of patiently caring for their child lose their pristine simplicity in many long and sleepless nights, other pathways of thought may tug at mothers' equilibrium and feed into their growing sense of doubt, ambivalence, and loss of self. These pathways of thought arise from the assumptions of western culture and Christian tradition, which have *imagined* that women mother naturally, happily, and competently. Though motherhood can be an experience of great joy, personal enrichment and spiritual growth, these troublesome assumptions of culture and religious tradition belie the complexity of motherhood and often work to hinder women's development.¹

The literature on motherhood consistently employs the term journey to describe the experience of becoming a mother, reflecting women's sense of moving away from the familiar towards something unknown, difficult, yet potentially transformative. This metaphor can be a

¹For discussion of both the joys and challenges of the experience see for example, Rachel Cusk, *A Life's Work: On Becoming a Mother* (New York: Picador USA, 2001); Melissa Gayle West, *If Only I Were A Better Mother* (Walpole, NJ: Stillpoint, 1992). For discussion of the influence of culture and religious tradition see for example Tina Miller, *Making Sense of Motherhood: A Narrative Approach* (Cambridge: University Press, 2005); Susan Maushart, *The Mask of Motherhood: How Becoming a Mother Changes Everything and Why We Pretend It Doesn't* (New York: New Press, 2000); Rosemary Radford Ruether, *The Making of the Modern Family: Ruling Ideologies, Diverse Realities* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000); Bonnie F. Miller-McLemore, *Also a Mother: Work and Family as Theological Dilemma* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994). For examples on the spirituality of motherhood see Aurelie M. Athan And Lisa Miller, "Spiritual Awakening Through the Motherhood Journey." *Journal of the Association For Research on Mothering* 7 (1) (2005): 17-31; Trudelle Thomas, "Becoming a Mother: Matrescence as Spiritual Formation," *Religious Education* 96 (1) (2001): 88-105; Ellyn Sanna, *Motherhood: A Spiritual Journey* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1997); Ann Tremaine Linthorst, *Mothering as a Spiritual Journey* (New York: Crossroad, 1998).

useful opening for religious educators, but it needs to be used with care. Because a journey can suggest a lonely or unfocused path as well as one that fosters self-transcendence and communion, it is important to establish the *kind* of journey that can create a path most accessible to the journey's transformative potential. Within the many secular and religious journey metaphors,² this paper suggests that the metaphor of pilgrimage contains striking parallels with the five educational "forms" of church life identified by Maria Harris.³ Imaginative fashioning of these forms through the lens of pilgrimage wisdom can help women to perceive their experiences of motherhood as an invitation to spiritual growth.

The "Forms" and Pilgrimage

Harris identifies five educational "forms" within the diversity of church life: *koinonia* (community), *leiturgia* (prayer), *didache* (teaching), *kerygma* (proclamation), and *diakonia* (service). She argues that education occurs through these forms and towards these forms e.g., we educate to prayer by engaging in prayer and worship; we educate to service by becoming involved and committed to serving others. Each of the forms requires fashioning in the sense of intentional, creative, and thoughtful design based on the context of the community.

Harris's articulation of the educative curriculum of the entire church flows out of the image of the church as the People of God, presented in the Vatican II document, *Lumen Gentium*⁴ as the primary metaphor for the church. *Lumen Gentium* also images the people of God as pilgrims, journeying together and as one to our heavenly home (#7, #48). Thus, built into the church's very identity is the metaphor of religious journey.

Religious educators such as Dwayne Huebner and Thomas Groome use the metaphor of pilgrimage to describe the activity of religious education.⁵ However, Brett Webb-Mitchell suggests that the use of the metaphor of pilgrimage for religious education must first be

² See Corelyn F. Senn, "Journeying as Religious Education: The Shaman, The Hero, The Pilgrim, and the Labyrinth Walker," *Religious Education* 97 (2) (2002): 124-140; Iris M. Yob, "The Pragmatist and Pilgrimage: Revitalizing an Old Metaphor for Religious Education," *Religious Education* 84 (1) (1989): 521-537; Brett Webb-Mitchell, "Leaving Development Behind and Beginning Pilgrimage," *Religious Education* 96 (1) (2001): 136-151. Phil Cousineau, *The Art of Pilgrimage: The Seeker's Guide to Making Travel Sacred*, (New York: MJF Books 1998); Edward Sellner, *Pilgrimage: Exploring a Great Spiritual Practice* (Notre Dame, Indiana: Sorin Books, 2004).

³ Maria Harris, *Fashion Me a People: Curriculum in the Church* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1989).

⁴ Second Vatican Council, "Lumen Gentium" [The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church]. In *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents* new rev. ed., edited by Austin Flannery, (Northport, NY: Costello Publishing Company (1964) 1992).

⁵ Dwayne Huebner, "Toward a Remaking of Curricular Language," in *Heightened Consciousness, Cultural Revolution, and Curriculum Theory*, edited by William Pinar. (Berkeley CA: McCutcheon, 1974); Thomas Groome, *Christian Religious Education: Sharing our Story and Vision* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1980) and *Will There be Faith? A New Vision for Educating and Growing Disciples* (New York: HarperOne, 2011).

grounded in educating the people of God to see themselves *as* pilgrims in the deepest sense of this image, which involves beginning from, being formed by, and being returned to a community.⁶ Webb-Mitchell suggests that the way towards understanding one's identity as a pilgrim is through the wisdom inherent in the characteristics of pilgrimage. In this sense, religious education does not just image the rhythm of pilgrimage; it explores and engages in the various aspects of pilgrimage in order to create pilgrims. To paraphrase Maria Harris, it educates to pilgrimage through the form of pilgrimage. This may mean devising religious education endeavors around a physical pilgrimage.⁷ But that is not always plausible, especially in relation to the everyday experience of mothers. However, educating through and towards pilgrimage can also mean viewing what is already present within theories of religious education through a different lens. To that end, Harris's educational forms of church life contain within them many of the characteristics found in pilgrimage wisdom. With thoughtful and creative fashioning, these forms can help instill a pilgrim identity within the everyday contours of the community's life. And since so many mothers already speak in terms of being on a journey, encouraging them towards a pilgrim identity may help to change the tenor of their traveling.

Some Parallels

One of the most important aspects of pilgrimage is the role of the community. While the hero and the shaman experience their journey in isolation from the community, the pilgrim's community provides motivation, encouragement, companionship, direction, and welcome upon return.⁸ In parallel, Maria Harris speaks of koinonia as the "initial educational ministry."⁹ The effort to fashion the church's educational ministry cannot happen unless the community first exists. Webb-Mitchell writes, "Oftentimes, what is most important about being on pilgrimage is being conscious that we exist among others in the body of Christ."¹⁰ Like the community of a pilgrimage, the form of koinonia understands the need and benefit of being in communion with one another and educates towards that purpose.

Pilgrimage also contains parallels with leiturgia in its use and honoring of gestures and rituals. Webb-Mitchell notes, "The constant, repetitious use of gestures in our lives, which begins as novel, soon after becomes more or less a part of our lives."¹¹ This is the same rationale in viewing leiturgia as an educational ministry of the church. The church hopes for incremental growth and gradual identification with Christ "as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup" (1 Cor 11:26).

Pilgrims depend upon the community's wisdom and experience as they embark upon and endure the journey. Indeed, resisting the community's knowledge may create dangerous conditions for the traveler.¹² The community provides its travel directions, not in order to dominate, but to enrich the experience for the journeyer. Likewise, the church form of didache, at its best, instructs out of loving concern.

⁶ Webb-Mitchell, 2001, 137

⁷ See Brett Webb-Mitchell, *School of the Pilgrim: An Alternative Path to Christian Growth*. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press 2007).

⁸ (Senn, 125-136; Webb-Mitchell 2001, 145-146; Yob, 521-522; Sellner, 154).

⁹ Harris, 75.

¹⁰ Webb-Mitchell 2007, 27.

¹¹ Ibid, 38

¹² (Senn 2002, 131-134; Webb-Mitchell 2007, 32).

Pilgrims learn through the physical experience of pilgrimage. One experiences the journey through one's bodily movements. Even when not physically engaged in pilgrimage, they learn to pay attention to their "ordinary lives with extraordinary awareness."¹³ This wisdom comes from the discipline of pilgrimaging, but it also exists because there is an a priori knowledge of the sacred nature of the body. At the heart of the kerygma of the church is this same vision of the goodness of creation. It is thus called to speak out against any claim or stance that belittles the embodied nature of revelation and to advocate for recognition of the locus of revelation in the ordinary, lived experience of each of its members.

Pilgrimage is not a haphazard or impulsive event. Pilgrims knowingly embark on the journey, moved by their own sense of dis-ease or their community's encouragement of the experience. Because it is intentional, pilgrims prepare for the journey. The community facilitates the preparation as a loving service of enablement. In the same way, the church's curriculum of diakonia looks to prepare and ease the road for others.

The Pilgrim Mother

The broad parameters of a religious journey or pilgrimage involve the movements of beginning, being on, and returning.¹⁴ In order to ensure a religiously educative experience, the beginning of the pilgrimage must take into account the end or goal, the being on must give full attention and honoring of the experiences of the road, and the return needs to impact the community and the wider world of the journeyer. In order to appropriate the pilgrimage metaphor for the religious education of mothers we can now imagine how the forms of church life, functioning within these movements, could enhance mothers' path. This includes a discussion and enlargement of Trudelle Thomas's suggestions to support mothers through community prayer, education, advocacy, and parent preparation.¹⁵

The Beginning

There are many reasons why a person would go on pilgrimage but it most often stems from unsettlement in one's life.¹⁶ The pilgrim is motivated by a need to perceive deeper meaning and has been assured by the community that the path ahead can offer insight. But pilgrimage is not an aimless path. It has an orienting principle. As Webb-Mitchell notes, "In pilgrimage, the telos, the point of the journey, defines the method and the journey itself."¹⁷ Thus in order to reimagine the woman's journey of motherhood as a pilgrimage, the religious educator must first ensure that the journey has a goal or an orienting principle, which provides direction to the traveling. This direction is communicated through all the forms of church life but it begins with and flows from koinonia. The community must first exist and lovingly attract in order to provide direction. This presumes the community's hospitality, which would include an awareness of the often life-altering realities of motherhood.¹⁸ If a pilgrim is a traveler who is taken seriously¹⁹

¹³ Webb-Mitchell 2007, 33

¹⁴ Edward Sellner describes these stages as separation, transition and incorporation, 100-103.

¹⁵ Thomas, 103-105.

¹⁶ Yob, 521. Cousineau, 15.

¹⁷ Webb-Mitchell 2001, 148.

¹⁸ Maushart, 36; Athan and Miller.

¹⁹ Webb-Mitchell 2007, 11

then the pilgrim mother's experience needs to be appreciated by the community in all its complexity.

The optimal situation for mothers would be to make a connection prior to pregnancy and childbirth so that the loving arms of the community could point the way and prepare them from the very beginning of their journey. Through the diakonia of parenting preparation and the didache of Christian formation, women would already be aware of the challenges that await them and the insights that could provide meaning to the challenges. As Thomas asks, "What if young people grew up hearing about the spirituality of mothering?"²⁰ Through the community's leiturgia and kerygma, women would already have experienced rituals highlighting the needs, fears, and delights of pregnancy, childbirth, and parenting, and heard preaching and teaching about these realities. Because these experiences were made visible through the leiturgia and kerygma of the community, the beginning of their own journey of motherhood could acquire a deeper sense of being called and encouraged towards an opportunity for rich personal and spiritual development.

However, it is often the case that the first contact with the community occurs during baptismal preparation.²¹ Depending upon the community's approach, baptismal preparation can be a discrete element of its life (something that the community *does*) or an integral element of the community's identity or vocation (something that it *is*). Throughout the preparation, the deeper question involves how the educational forms of church life are operating within the preparation and how they are inviting the mother to pilgrimage. For instance, what is her experience of koinonia? Does she experience the loving attention of mentoring women or other couples who do not ignore her doubts and questions? What is the kerygma she hears? Does she hear claim to the sacred nature of her physical experiences?²² What and how does she experience the community's didache? Does she understand the Christian tradition as her guide and not her burden? How does the mother experience the community's diakonia? What is the community's promise to her? Will they support the mother along her path? Does she feel enabled to make the journey? And finally, how does the community's liturgia touch her? Do the gestures, rituals, and elements of baptism draw her into a sense of mystery? Does she recognize that mystery, not clarity, will be her most common companion during motherhood. Can she be strengthened to accept this reality as she begins her journey?

Being On

Although there can be much time and effort expended in preparation for the journey, the locus of the activity of pilgrimage takes place on the way. The pilgrim knows that a promised sacred destination lies ahead, but is encouraged to find the sacred promise of the journey itself. A pilgrim must learn not to rush through the landscape like a tourist, but to slow down the pace and focus on walking and seeing. Although the community proscribes the route and can offer valuable advice about the road, the pilgrim's own thoughts, anxieties, and personal "baggage" impacts the pace or the path.²³

²⁰ Thomas, 104.

²¹ See also Dawn Michelle Alitz. 2009. "The Spiritual Formation of Adults in the Advent and Event of Parenting." (PhD diss., Luther Seminary, 2009). 197-202.

²² Thomas, 103.

²³ See Yob 1989, 522).

Most of the language about a mother's journey arises from the long stretch of actually "doing" mothering, which in reality never ends. During this time, the community's kerygma can remind the pilgrim mother to pay attention to her life. It is in her embodied existence, in the touching, feeding, cleaning, crying, loving and hating of her daily life, that God calls and is revealed. As Melissa West asks, "What if all ground is holy? What if all bushes are burning, as well as trees, stones, creatures, our children, ourselves, and all the spaces between?"²⁴ The community can communicate its appreciation for the revelatory potential of motherhood, in a number of ways. Trudelle Thomas notes that the Christian community needs to hear about the realities of motherhood, "not just on talk shows and in "women's" magazines—but also from the pulpit and the podium, in Bible studies and classrooms; not just in childbirth education classes, but also in religion classes and in theological tomes."²⁵

The community's leiturgia can also make both the joys and the struggles of motherhood more visible and more an occasion for prayer. The more that motherhood can be spoken of and celebrated as an extraordinary undertaking that must be learned, rather than as a natural role that must be assumed, the ups and downs of the journey will not come as such a surprise to the pilgrim mother. Harris speaks of the importance of making resources on prayer and spirituality available to the community.²⁶ Some communities already send periodic literature attuned to the child's development. Furthermore, there is a plethora of well-done essays and reflections on the spirituality of motherhood.²⁷ Besides creating a book list for young mothers, the community can gift the mothers with such literature, at various times throughout the early years of mothering.

Though the community indicates the pilgrimage's direction and *raison d'être*, pilgrims can quickly forget their beginning as they endure the unexpected realities encountered during the "being on." Like the difference between the happy mother-to-be at her baby shower and the cranky, scared, mother longing for sleep a few weeks later, the journey deviates from expectation and can feel directionless. However, because the pilgrim mother has embarked upon a *religious* journey, she needs to be reminded that growth is not synonymous with forward progress and that indeed, coming upon one's limitations can be a graced experience. The community can provide opportunities for the mother to name her struggles and her joys honestly through its *koinonia*. By encouraging the formation of mothers' sharing groups, or mother's bible study or prayer groups, the community creates a hospitable environment where women can feel the support and camaraderie of other journeyers.²⁸

The community's *koinonia* needs to extend to the Internet. Indeed, seeking support and information online is often the first instinct for young women and the list of mothers' blogs and websites is long. As the mother faces her limitations of patience, courage, and wakefulness in the middle of the night, finding the faith community's presence and interest during her online searching can offer consolation and perspective.

²⁴ West, 105.

²⁵ Thomas, 104.

²⁶ Harris, 105-106)

²⁷ See for example Rachel Barton, *4 A.M. Madonnas: Meditations and Reflections for Mothers and Mothers-to-Be* (Liguori, Missouri: Liguori, 2007). Besze Wallace, ed. *Always There: Reflections for Moms on God's Presence*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Revell 2012); Jennifer Grant, *Wholehearted Living: Five-Minute Reflections for Modern Moms* (Loyola Press 2014).

²⁸ (Thomas, 102).

The community's didache can be fashioned to help mothers become more adept in understanding the religious translation of their experiences. However, in the busyness and confusion of their days, and the possible marginalization of their religious involvement, they will not usually be prone to attend organized classes on spirituality. But just as pilgrims often depend upon a pilgrim guide to help them navigate the way²⁹ so many mothers can find direction in the companionship of a mentor mother whose own living faith can provide the greatest instruction.

Many women experience diverse and sometimes dire circumstances as they travel on the journey of motherhood. The isolation of mothers with post-partum depression, the distinct experiences of lesbian couples, the difficulties of single working mothers, the challenges associated with a child's illness or special needs, and the hopelessness of those mothering in poverty present difficult traveling conditions. The community's diakonia can be a vibrant presence along the journey, noticing and responding in loving service to the pain or the particular trials that many mothers endure.

The Return

The common resolution of a religious journey involves a rebirth of self; the journeyer gains new understanding and new capacities, which must somehow be integrated into the community. In a pilgrimage, the community knows about and desires the journey for the pilgrim. It senses the pilgrim's eagerness to explore and question and it sanctions the leaving. But it longs for the return and listens for the pilgrim's acquired insights.

The first two movements of the young adult mother's pilgrimage of motherhood, beginning and being on, are not difficult to overlay on her physical experience. Motherhood always has a beginning, and it clearly has a passage. But how can we speak of a return? Pilgrims end their journey and return to a community that eagerly awaits and delights in the pilgrim's new insights. But mothers cannot and do not end their journey, especially when in the midst of the immediate demands of little children. And even when these demands disappear into a hazy past, the connection that caused the journey, that intimate love that was once so physically encompassing, often remains as a psychological and emotional stamp or seal, which accompanies the mother's movement even in her separateness. Thus, when we speak of a return, it is more helpful to overlay the image on various *stages* within the pilgrimage of motherhood, conscious that the changes inherent to mothering create an ever-evolving journey. A mother comes up for air, as it were, at various times during her motherhood and in the process, essentially returns to herself, albeit a transformed self.³⁰ It is these moments that can be understood as a return from a stage of pilgrimage. How the community greets the mother's transformed self, how it helps her to discern the meaning of her experiences, and how it prepares her for the next stage of mothering (and life) is the task of religious education. Religious educators can examine how the educational forms of church life can both receive the mothers into the community *and* reequip them for further traveling.

If the church has fashioned its educational forms to support and enrich the "being on" the journey, then its koinonia has already encouraged mothers' faith sharing groups and will continue to foster honest conversations about mothers' journey. Its leiturgia has already given liturgical and prayerful expression to mothers' experiences and will continue to incorporate mothers' voices and consider their needs in its gestures and rituals. Its kerygma has already

²⁹ Webb-Mitchell 2007, 85-86.

³⁰ Sanna, 56-57).

proclaimed and encouraged conversation about the revelatory nature of motherhood and will continue to speak prophetically against injustices towards women and children in the world. Its didache has already sought ways and language to connect Christian teachings with postmodern culture and the realities of mothers' life experiences. It will continue to question theological and cultural assumptions about women. Its diakonia has already found ways to care for mothers' many and diverse needs. It will continue to seek ways to enable mothers to ease the burdens particular to many mothers' lives. As these educational forms interrelate, the community can better fashion a true experience of the return, which recognizes the pilgrim's travails, applauds the pilgrim's courage, and makes room for the pilgrim's insight. In other words, the mother returning from a stage of her pilgrimage can be supported by the existing forms and can add to their refashioning.

Many mothers are surprised when they encounter the profound joys and intense difficulties that course through the experience of motherhood. Yet within their narratives and blogs, the desire to speak about what they have learned is even more pronounced. Similar to pilgrims who "use their experience to adjust to and strengthen the current structure of society,"³¹ mothers can add new found insights to the community's wisdom if the community has been educated to listen expectantly to these pilgrim's stories.

Our faith communities have the responsibility and means to help mothers perceive the religious dimension of their motherhood. This can be facilitated through a broad understanding of religious education, which fashions each form of church life in order to call forth the mother's spiritual potential. By relating the forms of church life to an understanding of pilgrimage, religious educators can help the mother grow into a pilgrim identity. This identity, by its very nature, learns to recognize that the realities of the road hold the potential for "thin places"³² (Forest 2007, 70) where God's presence can be perceived and where the attempts to respond to this presence can begin.

³¹ Senn, 133.

³² Jim Forest, *The Road to Emmaus: Pilgrimage as a Way of Life* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2007).

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The study of motherhood is a promising and relevant field of psychology. This article represents the results of a study in which a socio-psychological analysis of reproductive attitudes and demographic behaviour was conducted. The study also shows the relationship between attitudes related to motherhood and women's cultural affiliations. The factors that contribute to the nature of attitudes towards motherhood and the interaction between these factors were studied. According to the results of this study, we distinguished the most significant characteristics of the attitudes to motherhood that