

Mater, Model for the Millennium

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I remember one day when I was a junior in high school. In the midst of an ordinary conversation, I suddenly saw my mother differently. She became for me another person in her own right, quite distinct from her relationship to me and my needs. She became another woman with her own emotional and physical needs, with her own dreams, disappointments and limitations. We were united not only by the biological bond of mother-child, but also by a shared humanity. Perhaps you have had that experience with your own mother or with your daughter. I think that something similar happens in our relationship with Mater.

I am sure that those of you who attended St. Philippine's canonization remember the night that all Sacred Heart alumnae converged on the Trinita for a reception in numbers far greater than had been expected. Trying to find a chair or elbow one's way to the rapidly depleted food tables paled in comparison with the challenge of squeezing into the lines slowly inching their way up the stairs for the opportunity to pray before the original fresco. Hymns and prayers to Our Lady in different languages and different keys signaled to those below that one group had made room for another – and held out hope that we, too, might make it.

Thinking about that event later, I found myself wondering, "What is it about a painting on a wall, a painting that is really not great art, that is certainly not a realistic depiction of a young Jewish girl that inspires this kind of devotion?"

I think it is that the painting of Mater is for us an icon – an image that draws us into and beyond the actual representation, that serves as a gateway into deeper knowledge and experience of

God's presence and action in Mary's life and God's presence and action in our own lives.

Whenever and wherever we see the image of Mater, we touch into our own life stories. For those who attended a Sacred Heart school as a child, Mater evokes memories of the young girl you once were, memories of your teachers, your friends, pink frosted cupcakes for goûter, writing letters to Mater – maybe you even recall what kind of person you asked her to help you become, and maybe you hear God now asking you what is taking you so long to get there.

I had no childhood association with Mater. When I finally made it up the stairs to her shrine that night at the Trinita, I felt in touch once again with the young and gradually not so young nun I had been at Newton Country Day School and Carrollton and was filled with awe and gratitude for God's faithfulness during all the years of extraordinary changes that have intervened since then.

Whenever we gaze upon a reproduction of Mater, I think we see more than the lovely young girl in the pink dress, more than the distaff, the lily and the book. We see the whole mystery of Mary's life; we know that she grew up; she became a mature woman. Pauline Perdrau in 1873. painted another Mater. "Unlike the first Mater, the spinner is not beginning her labor; this depicts the skillful weaver finishing her cloth, with scissors in hand about to cut the thread. This new Mater contrasts with the lovely glowing teenager. The same youthful features have turned into an older, aged woman, living and praying on the threshold of the eternal dwelling." Step by step, throughout her life, Mary experienced the consequences of God's choice of her. Being pregnant, giving birth, watching her child grow, letting Him go when the time came for Him to leave home, watching Him die, holding His dead body. Mary, as some of you, experienced the death of her husband; she missed his love and companionship; she experienced loneliness.

But far from passively submitting or grimly enduring what happened to her, Mary, both as

the teenager depicted in *Mater Admirabilis*, and as the mature woman portrayed in *Mater at John's House*, stepped into each day and embraced her life, sure of only one thing – that her God was faithful; her God was with her. "Blessed is she who has believed that the promise of the Lord will be fulfilled" proclaimed Elizabeth, and Mary acknowledged the truth of her greeting, "My being proclaims the greatness of the Lord."

What can Mater be for us today? We are no longer school girls in the safe and secure environs of a Convent of the Sacred Heart. We live in a pretty chaotic and frightening world, a world of unprecedented problems and almost limitless possibilities. What can Mater teach us today? What are we open to learning?

At the very beginning of her existence, at that mysterious moment when her human life began in her mother's womb, we know that God drew her into a relationship of friendship and love, a relationship so intense and so intimate that it freed her to live centered in God rather than self. The power of love within her kept her face to face with God, kept her from trying to escape her fears and doubts and heartaches.

I think what she wants to show us today is to believe in ourselves, to believe that, through our baptism, we, too, are full of grace, drawn into the very life of God. We, too, are highly favored daughters in whom and for whom God has done, is doing, great things. Why should it be hard to accept that? More than thirty-five years ago we heard in the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church that "All the faithful of Christ, are called to the fullness of the Christian life and to the perfection of charity. In the various types and duties of life, one and the same holiness is cultivated by all who are moved by the Spirit of God."

If we really believe that God's spirit is working in us, leading us to holiness, we can begin to

realize that union with God is ours now; fullness of life is ours now – not in some misty afterlife, not as reward for eating our vegetables, keeping our room neat or not “losing our notes.” We are never going to be loved by God more than we are at this moment. Our capacity to recognize that love, to respond to it and take delight in it may increase, but God’s love for us is steadfast, unchanging. In our uniqueness and humanness, we are called to be new manifestations of God’s holiness in our world today, in this new millennium.

Pope John Paul II, in proclaiming this a Jubilee Year, stated as its objective "to inspire in all the faithful a true longing for holiness, a deep desire for conversion and personal renewal, in a context of ever more intense prayer and solidarity with one's neighbors, especially the neediest."

I think Mater challenges us to take those words seriously, to look at our attitudes, behaviors, and choices in the light of our call to holiness. Are they reflective of the mind and heart of God? Do they promote the coming of God's kingdom, of God's reign of justice and peace, in our cities and our neighborhoods, in our families and workplaces? We need to be in our time as she was in hers, prophetic women.

The role of the prophet as described by Walter Brueggemann, a contemporary Old Testament scholar, is "to nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us." The prophet stands within the community and proclaims, by her life more than her words or deeds, that there is another way. The prophet goes about the business of our ordinary, daily living in an extraordinary way, a way that befits a people who have been made like unto God; a way that bespeaks a people whom God has chosen, a people for whom God's love is enough.

I think that in the new millennium, Mater also wants us to meet the challenge of living as

women of hope. Hope is not wishful thinking that things will get better “once I get my driver’s license, or my degree, or once I’m married...once the children are grown or Jack makes partner, or the mortgage is paid off – everything will be better, everything will be all right”. As we grow older we gradually recognize that there is no magic moment free of difficulties or disappointments. We experience that things do not always get better; sometimes they get worse. We need to believe, not in a time when we will be free from pain or failure, from loneliness or heartbreak, but in God’s promise that I am with you always; you are precious to Me; I hold you in the palm of My hand; fear not.

Hope enables us courageously to set about the task of our life again and again. Hope empowers us to live with the conviction that something new and dynamic has already begun through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. If we are women of hope, we will have the energy to hold together in creative tension the "already," the reality of God's reign in our midst and the reality of all that is "not yet" that we experience in our personal lives, in our society, and in our Church. Hope frees us from complacency or rigidity, from apathy or anger. A woman of hope questions the way things are and keeps on moving onward, looking outward, convinced that God never ceases calling her to a new and more abundant life

I think Mater wants us to believe, to proclaim the goodness of the Lord and the great things God has done for us, and to accept our giftedness and call to holiness. She wants us to be women of hope who point with their lives to another way of being and acting. But perhaps her strongest call is that we become women of prayer and that we not make that more difficult than it need be. God has not set us up for failure or called us into an endless cycle of searching and never finding. God is always drawing near to us in invitation and self-disclosure.

Prayer is about presence and relationship. It is not about making God present. God is already

present to us. It is the process of opening ourselves to that presence and letting it transform us.

Prayer is not about methods or formulas or resolutions or finding answers. Prayer really is not about us or our agendas. Prayer is about God, about God's presence to us and our presence to God as we are at this point in our life. The real difficulty about prayer is that it has no difficulty. There are no norms, no rules. God never ceases looking at us with love, but He needs our consent if His love is not to be powerless.

St. Madeleine Sophie, who spent many hours praying before Mater at the Trinita, wrote once to one of her nuns, "Be in peace about the state of your soul and your manner of prayer; only love and do what you please. The essential thing, and the proof of true love, is forgetfulness of self and of one's own interests; to think only of the One loved. So what difference does it make how you pray, provided that your heart is seeking the One whom you love?"

I would like to close by reading from a letter from our Mother General, Patricia Garcia de Quevedo, to the Religious of the Sacred Heart throughout the world calling us to a year of preparation for the celebration of the Society's bicentennial. "In this year of preparation may we be immersed in the Heart of God. May our contemplation be fresh and alert, our action deeply contemplative, and may both find their source in our intimacy with the mind and heart of God. From there may we be empowered to journey outwards to our brothers and sisters and to recommit ourselves to the service of God's reign of love, peace, justice and reconciliation."

Let us recommit ourselves now, asking Mater to be our guide and support, and say together the following prayer adapted from a letter of Reverend Mother deLescure:

Under the pressure of over-activity which at times consumes us, disturbs us, or scatters our energies in doing what is visible and accidental let us come to our Mater.

She is the Mother of the Invisible and the Mother of the Essential.

Let us ask her to detach us, to free us from all that is not important,

to lead us on, and to fix our gaze upon the Invisible

which her own eyes look upon:

the Invisible Presence, the Invisible Life,

the Invisible Action, the Invisible Love,

all those things which are eternal values in us

and the great realities of faith.

May she keep us throughout our busy and overcrowded days

in the radiance of things that are not seen

and firm as if we beheld the Invisible.

In the midst of non-essentials

which invite and often distract us,

we run the risk of encumbering our beings

and confusing our values.

May she give us the right understanding of the Essential

and a hunger for it.

One thing alone is necessary—

the will of God and the work of God's love.

May Mater give us this singleness of vision

so that we, too, may see

the Invisible and the Essential in all.

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