

| NATIVITY: HAVING A MOTHER, BEING A MOTHER |

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn. (Luke 2:1-7)

When I was a child, my mother had a no-fail remedy for anything that was worrying me. Whether I was troubled by a nightmare, brooding over a problem at school, or haunted by a scary story I'd heard on the news, I'd find her and tell her that something was on my mind. Immediately she'd stop whatever she was doing—making dinner, folding laundry—and say, “Let’s have a rock talk.”

Off we'd go to the living room, where she'd sit in the wooden rocking chair and I'd curl up on her lap. As she rocked us back and forth, I'd spill out my fear while she listened, her arms around me. Within minutes, my worried little mind would unclench itself. Putting my fear into words was soothing, the motion of the chair was soothing, but above all, the close listening presence of my mother would loosen the grip of my most tenacious worries. She always knew exactly what to say to put my situation into perspective and to shrink my gargantuan fear down to an insignificant size. There was no problem bigger than my mother's ability to comfort.

Though it's been years since my last "rock talk," I've never forgotten the safety that I felt in those quiet moments. It's the same safety that I see reflected in images of Mary holding the child Jesus. Among the countless depictions of Madonna and Child that I've seen throughout my life, one of my favorites is the statue in my childhood church. It's made of light-colored wood and painted in soft pink and blue, baby colors, the shades of sunrise and sky. In this statue Mary holds Jesus near to her heart. She is looking down at him with gentle absorption and a gaze that promises the same unwavering protection that I found in my own mother. Mary and Jesus may not have had "rock talks," but there's no doubt that he grew up feeling safe and loved, always aware that his mother was a soft place for him to fall. Even the Son of God must have needed his mommy sometimes.

Many of the women I interviewed expressed a feeling of comfort with the image of Mary as a mother. Their own experiences of maternal support make it easy for them to see her as a nurturing presence, one who, like their own mothers, is always ready to listen and to soothe. Mary may be known as Our Lady of many things, but to these women, such titles are superfluous. To them, she is simply Mom.

"My mother has always been there for me, and so has Mary," says Lorelei, a thirty-four-year-old photographer. In fact, her devotion to Mary is directly due to maternal example. As a child in the Philippines, Lorelei regularly prayed the rosary with her mother and sister before the household shrine of the Holy Family. She also remembers a pilgrimage she took at age ten, when she and her mother walked to a Mary grotto: "I remember walking endlessly, being half asleep." Taxing though that experience was, Lorelei's experience of Mary has always been one of comfort, of a mother who is only a prayer away. "The first thing I always turned to was the rosary when I was depressed, had broken up with someone, or was upset about something," she says. Although her growing closeness to Jesus has recently caused Mary to fade into the background, the sense of unconditional love that the Blessed Mother evokes is still powerfully present in her spiritual life. "I've always had a sense of assurance that she's there, just

being motherly and caring for me,” she reflects. “My mom has always been there—she didn’t approve of half of the stuff I did, but she’s always been supportive no matter what. I guess you could say Mary is a reflection of my mom and vice versa.”

Lisa, a thirty-four-year-old designer, also identifies Mary with her own mother. In her case, it was a connection that took many years to develop. As a child growing up in New Mexico, she was confused by references to the two Marys—Mary the Mother of God and Mary Magdalene—and thought they were the same person. Even when that misunderstanding was cleared up, the Blessed Mother always felt rather remote. “I could not feel close to her—like I knew her—the way I did with Jesus,” Lisa recalls. “I wanted to know her. I really did. I just did not know how.” This desire came in large part from having witnessed her own mother’s close relationship with Mary. “I looked back and remembered my mom calling on our Holy Mother, *‘Ay, Virgen Maria, ilumina me!’* (Oh, Virgin Mary, enlighten me!) She called on Mary during major trials, and she called on Mary in order to find the car keys.” Lisa recalls that Mary not only directed her mother to the missing keys, she also led the family through more grave struggles: “Though serious illnesses had knocked on the door of our home more than once...they never stayed for dinner. I watched my mother’s faith in Mary and I knew there was something to it. I knew Mom had been blessed, and through her, I was blessed.”

At age twenty-eight, living and working in San Francisco, Lisa became serious about rejuvenating her spiritual life. “I cut hours at work and went on a quest to relearn/relive my faith. I fell in love with Catholicism and my Jesus all over again...and my questions about Mary resurfaced.” Inspired by a supportive church community, Lisa embarked on a journey to understand God’s mother more intimately. She began to pray the rosary daily, and, when asked to do a brief presentation about Mary at church, she did not let her own questions stop her. “I knew it was God’s plan,” she says.

In reflecting on Mary, Lisa found herself thinking about the protection and love she had always received from her own mother. “I thought about how, from one hundred miles away, my mother still reminded my twenty-eight-year-old self to brush my teeth, wear a coat and not to become an alcoholic as a result of living near the wine country,” she laughs. “Then I thought of Mary, Jesus’ mommy. I thought about how she had to stand back and watch as her baby was verbally degraded, beaten and put to a horrible death. I knew my own mom would give her life for me, and I imagined that Mary probably wanted to as well as she mourned for her son.” It was an epiphany that made Mary real in a way that nothing else had ever done. “Suddenly, I knew her,” Lisa recalls. “She was no longer a Bible character, or an impersonal deity. She was my mother.”

* * *

For Lorelei and Lisa love is the thread uniting Mary and their own moms. Some of the women I interviewed, however, grew up with mothers who were distant, uninvolved or lacking in affection. As a result, the nurturing side of Mary is something they associate not with their biological mothers, but with other female figures in their lives. Two of these women described how grandmothers stepped in where their birth mothers couldn’t, offering a maternal encouragement that mirrors the love of Mary herself.

Another Lisa, a thirty-nine-year-old educator and mother of three, finds that it is still painful to reflect on certain aspects of her childhood. “I grew up in an abusive home where my own mother wasn’t able to accept, love and nurture me,” she explains. “Despite this contentious relationship I was fortunate enough to have people in my life that loved and supported me unconditionally, my father and grandmother in particular. My grandmother, Helen, became my mother figure.” As a child, Lisa found that Mary herself offered the kind of love and protection that she found in her grandmother. The statue of Mary that stood in Lisa’s school corridor always gave her the sense of being cherished. “Each time I would glance at that serene face I would find comfort,” she recalls. “I loved that

our society would honor mothers, especially this holy one. I would leave the statue feeling stronger, even loved.”

Throughout Lisa’s life, prayers to Mary have always brought her peace. Today, the Memorare prayer is the equivalent of her own “rock talk,” guiding her through the occasional restless night. “No matter how worried, angry, or upset I am, at some point this prayer request ‘kicks in’ and I feel Mary’s presence with me.” Through all of these experiences, Lisa has come to see Mary as the ultimate universal mother, one who is able to kiss her children’s past hurts and make them better. “I believe her unconditional love helps heal these childhood wounds, making us better wives, mothers and friends,” she says. “I believe that this in some small way makes the world a better place.”

Like Lisa, Solange, thirty-six, grew up with a closer connection to her grandmother than to her own mother. The academic budget analyst was raised in Berkeley, California, where her father had moved to escape his “hopelessly bourgeois, conventional Catholic-school upbringing.” Her parents gave her little in the way of spiritual grounding; she recalls that she “was taught to believe in sensible shoes, high-quality chocolate, fancy cheese, a healthy mistrust of authority and not much else.” Her grandparents, though, were devout Irish Catholics, and Solange was exposed to their faith during the summers she spent with them. Her grandmother Dottie had lost her own mother at age thirteen, and Solange speculates that this was one reason for her grandmother’s staunch devotion to Mary. Solange could relate to the feeling of being orphaned. “Like many Generation-X children, I was forced to raise myself while my parents lived a prolonged and apparently indefinite childhood and worked on ‘finding themselves,’” she explains. “My grandmother was the closest thing I ever came to knowing unconditional, fully present maternal love.” In fact, throughout Solange’s turbulent childhood and adolescence and her “riotous” early twenties, Dottie turned to Mary in prayer, asking for protection for her granddaughter. She later told Solange that during those years, she would park by the ocean twice weekly and pray to Mary to keep

her granddaughter safe. “I firmly believe that my grandmother Dottie’s prayers did keep me safe in the midst of what could have been unimaginable harm,” says Solange. She found her grandmother’s prayers “deeply touching.” Though she could not relate to Jesus, she always had a positive impression of Mary. “She was benign, maternal, oceanic,” she recalls.

As Solange became an adult and her political consciousness began to take shape, she developed an aversion to Christianity. To her, the faith seemed to represent all that was repressive and wrong with a male-centered society. “The legacy of patriarchy gave women of my generation a markedly bad hangover, so I was still terribly uneasy with a Father-God and his Son,” she says. Within her social milieu, however, goddess worship and a belief in the feminine divine were widely accepted, and so her affection for Mary did not seem at odds with her dislike for Christianity. During this time she found herself gathering images of Mary wherever she could find them: at dime stores, at flea markets. “Suddenly, she was in every room of my house, along with crosses, which I had slowly and almost imperceptibly started to collect.”

At age thirty, Solange married a Catholic man from Ireland. Though the marriage was, as Solange recalls, “brief, beautiful and tragic,” it did have a lasting and rather surprising impact on her spiritual life. She began to feel a strong pull to enter the Catholic church. A variety of complications delayed her entrance into the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA), but in the fall of 2005 she began the process of her adult catechism.

Entering the program, Solange felt torn, wondering how she could become Catholic when she had so many personal struggles with core aspects of the faith. “I made an inventory of my conscience when I began RCIA and asked myself how I could legitimately want to be a Catholic when I had so much trouble accepting and understanding Jesus. My heart came to rest at this: that it would take time, but that I had been hearing a call for too long to dismiss it as a passing fancy, that I already understood and accepted Mary, and that she would take me where I needed to go.”

Solange decided that she would just “fake it till she made it,” and stayed in the program.

Over the coming months, Solange found that Mary was indeed leading her to her Son, introducing a Jesus who was far from the repressive figure Solange had always envisioned. “I heard nothing but a message of love—God as love and Jesus as a champion of ultimate love,” she explains. “I began to let go of holding Mary’s hand so tightly and move toward her Son, whom I have come to understand—and I am only at the beginning of getting to know him—as a hero, a speaker of truth, one who would not tolerate the smallness of humanity, who called us to truly be God’s children, in his image.” Much to her surprise, she has even found joy in some of the church’s dogmas and positions, a turn of events that she had never expected. She entered the church at the Easter Vigil in 2006.

Though Solange acknowledges that certain Protestant strains are more in line with her political views, to her the Catholic church has something that most other Christian religions don’t: deep reverence for Mary, the mother who played such a crucial role in nurturing her own spiritual growth. “We cannot underestimate the importance of Mary to women, particularly young women, who are forming their faith,” she says. “I still say a Hail Mary with my Our Fathers. I always sit on the side of the church nearest any image of Mary.” To Solange, Mary is the beloved maternal figure who, like her own grandmother, never gave up on her during the turbulent times. “She is still my ultimate mother, the supreme example of patience.”

* * *

These stories demonstrate the appeal Mary can hold for women who lack a close relationship with their mothers. To many of them she’s a source of comfort, the loving guardian who will never fail them. For other women, though, Mary provokes an opposite reaction: Their estrangement from their own mothers is a barrier to connecting with her. Because of past wounds, some women have a hard time trusting any maternal figure, even the Blessed Mother.