

‘Transforming Time - the Maternal Church and the Pilgrimage of Faith’

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Abstract:

Two related themes running through Pope Francis’s theology form the focus of this paper: the importance of time over space in the context of the unfolding story of salvation as a journey through history, and the motherhood of the Church, personified in Mary. On the face of it, these two different theological metaphors are not easy to combine to form a coherent ecclesiology. The first develops the Second Vatican Council’s imagery of the Church as the pilgrim people of God, and the other draws on a more ancient metaphor of the Church as Mother. This paper explores each of these in turn, in order to suggest ways in which they can be creatively integrated to offer a revitalised ecclesiology for our times.

However, this can only happen if the church takes a leap of faith to acknowledge the sacramental significance of the female body, which currently functions only as a marker of sacramental prohibition with regard to the exclusive masculinity of the priesthood.

In section III of *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis lists ‘four principles related to constant tensions in every social reality’, which must be addressed in the quest to build just and peaceful communities. These principles are: time is greater than space; unity prevails over conflict; realities are more important than ideas, and the whole is greater than the part (*EG* §221).¹

I focus primarily though not exclusively on the first of these principles – ‘time is greater than space.’ I see this as crucial to understanding Francis’s ecclesiology, his spirituality, and his style of leadership, and it provides the interpretative context for the other three principles.

The restoration of a sense of temporality to the Church’s doctrine and mission is a subtle but radical way of reanimating the historical, contextual ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council, which gave way to more static and absolutist doctrinal principles under the papacies of John Paul II and Benedict XVI. However, Francis emphasises the importance of a mystical dimension to his contextualised vision of the church in time. This suffuses what might otherwise be simply another political/liberationist ecclesiology with a profound awareness of the timeless otherness and mystery of God glistening darkly through and beyond all our time-bound endeavours, doctrines and theologies, most sublimely encountered in the theophany of the Mass. This is why we need to weave together the two metaphors of pilgrimage and motherhood, journeying and gestating, which shape his vision of the church.

Psychoanalysts identify the adult’s imagined infant relationship with the maternal body as the source of repressed fears and desires, but also as that aspect of

imagination and creativity that eludes the control of the conscious, rational mind. The maternal, Marian aspect of the church has always been expressive of the mystical dimension of Catholic consciousness and of the paradoxical intimacy in otherness of Catholic liturgy and devotion. It has also inspired the most sublime (and some of the most ridiculous!) examples of Catholicism's cultural and artistic forms of expression. When this dimension is emphasised at the expense of historical and contextual realities, then we risk a form of infantilised escapism. However, if we over-emphasise the historical and contextual without the mystical and sacramental, then we reduce the Christian life to one of political activism.

With this in mind, I begin by commenting briefly on the conflicted ecclesiology of the postconciliar church, before going on to explore the relationship between time and space in *Evangelii Gaudium* and in some of Francis's other published interviews and homilies. Finally, I ask how far his preferred metaphor of the maternal, Marian church coheres with this sense of history as salvation and as the self-revelation of God in the time of human becoming.

I am aware that the significance of Mary for ecclesiology and redemption remains one of the most vexed issues dividing churches within the broad Orthodox/Catholic spectrum from those within the equally broad Protestant/evangelical spectrum. It is beyond the scope of this essay to explore these issues, but I acknowledge the bemusement which some evangelicals might feel on reading what follows.

Conflicted Ecclesiologies in the Postconciliar Church

Two opposing factions have emerged among Catholics since the Council, operating with divergent interpretations of tradition. This is reflected in the debate sparked by Pope Benedict XVI when, in a lecture on hermeneutics to the Roman curia in December 2005, he contrasted 'a hermeneutic of discontinuity and rupture' with 'the hermeneutic of reform'.² Citing these terms a couple of years later in his 2007 apostolic exhortation *Sacramentum Caritatis*, he substituted 'continuity' for 'reform', so that the emphasis on a hermeneutic of continuity eclipsed the language of reform.³ Francis is clearly with the reformers, but he offers the church a potentially deeper and richer theology than either the progressivist and liberationist movements of the 1970s and 1980s, or the doctrinally rigid and romanticised nuptial ecclesiology that was the dominant theological trend under Pope John Paul II in particular.

The gendered relationship between the maternal church and the fatherhood of God has been a near constant feature of Catholic ecclesiology arguably since the Letter to the Ephesians,⁴ but it is difficult to find any such gendered language in the writings of Catholic theologians from the late 1960s to the 1980s.⁵ It returned with a vengeance in John Paul II's nuptial ecclesiology and theology of the body, and with the promotion of Hans Urs von Balthasar rather than Karl Rahner as the magisterium's theologian of choice – a shift that was at least in part a reaction against feminism, homosexuality and women's ordination.⁶ Yet even if this reactionary trend is open to criticism, it also invites reflection on how the Council continues to be interpreted in response to the rapidly changing global context in which we find ourselves. Did Vatican II throw both mother and baby out with the bath water?

The Council's abandonment of the idealised ecclesiology of Vatican I in favour of an image of the church as the pilgrim people of God has fuelled a progressive ecclesiology, often driven by western liberal ideas of progress and democracy informed by a rationalised and politicised understanding of faith. While many liberals and liberationists have embraced this modernising change, some feminists as well as

conservatives have expressed dismay at the loss of the maternal ecclesiology of the pre-conciliar church.

For example, Catholic feminist Charlene Spretnak, in her book *Missing Mary*, appeals for a rediscovery of the Catholic Church as ‘a container and guardian of mysteries far greater than itself’. She observes: ‘We who once partook of a vast spiritual banquet with boundaries beyond our ken are now allotted spare rations, culled by the blades of a “rationalized” agenda more acceptable to the modern mindset.’⁷

Von Balthasar, an arch rival of feminism, writes of the church since the Council having ‘put off its mystical characteristics’ and becoming preoccupied with meetings, structures and organisations, dominated by political theology. This is, he says, ‘more than ever a male Church, if perhaps one should not say a sexless entity, in which woman may gain for herself a place to the extent that she is ready herself to become such an entity’. He goes on to ask, ‘May the reason for the domination of such typically male and abstract notions be because of the abandonment of the deep femininity of the marian character of the Church?’⁸

I ask how far Francis is able to bring about some reconciliation between a politically engaged, historically contextualised church in solidarity with the poor, and a more traditional ecclesiology of the maternal church as an organic body of gestation, nurture and spiritual growth, redolent with a sense of sacramental mystery. In order to address these questions, we have to appreciate that it is impossible to separate the style from the substance of Francis’s theology, so let me say a little about Francis’s theological style in the context of the themes I am addressing.

Francis’s ecclesiology: a mother on the move

If Benedict XVI could be described as one of the church’s last great modern theologians, Francis is surely one of her first great postmodern theologians. He is a communitarian mystic, a narrative theologian who seeks truth in the carnivalesque exuberance of popular devotions and the faithful inconsistency of ordinary Catholics doing their best and often getting it wrong. In the press conference at the launch of *Evangelii Gaudium*, Archbishop Claudio Maria Celli, President of the Pontifical Council for Social Communication, drew attention to ‘the simple, familiar and direct language which has been the hallmark of the style that has emerged in the months of [Francis’s] pontificate’.⁹ Francis’s narrative style is earthed in the lives of the poor, in such a way that it is impossible to separate his personal experience of Latin America from his theological concerns. If Benedict’s church was the church of Christ enthroned in glory far above the squalor and struggle of earthly existence, Francis’s is the church of Jesus the Galilean, the barefoot storyteller trudging through the heat of the day in the midst of the people.

Everywhere we look, Francis’s God is on the move. In one of his daily Mass reflections he speaks of encountering God ‘walking, walking along the path’, and he describes the mystery of the incarnation as ‘a history of walking ... the Lord is still saving us in history and walking with his people’.¹⁰ His encyclical *Laudato Si’* extends this to encompass the whole of creation moving towards its fulfilment. We are, says Francis, ‘journeying towards the sabbath of eternity ... In union with all creatures, we journey through this land seeking God’. (*LS* §243).¹¹

Without directly criticising his predecessors, Francis is unleashing doctrine from its moorings in absolutist and closed spaces of interpretation, setting it free to journey and develop through time with and for the people of God, constantly open to new

interpretations and revelations in the context of different cultures and changing circumstances. This explains his insistence that ‘realities are greater than ideas’ (*EG* §231; see also *LS* §110). Ideas must be connected to realities. They must, says Francis, be ‘at the service of communication, understanding, and praxis’ (*EG* §232). Evangelization requires an incarnational reality, the reality ‘of a word already made flesh and constantly striving to take flesh anew’ (*EG* §233). He refers to this as ‘the unruly freedom of the word’ (*EG* §22).

Alongside this metaphorical dynamism is the language of fecundity – the fruitfulness of the maternal church. The word ‘fruitful’ appears repeatedly in *Evangelii Gaudium*. ‘An evangelizing community is’, writes Francis, ‘always concerned with fruit, because the Lord wants her to be fruitful’ (*EG* §24). We are called to be ‘mysteriously fruitful’ (*EG* §280) by surrendering our desire to plan and control our lives and trusting the guidance of the Holy Spirit. He quotes Isaac of Stella, who writes that every Christian is in a way ‘believed to be a bride of God’s word, a mother of Christ, his daughter and sister, at once virginal and fruitful’ (*EG* §285).¹²

This is the metaphorical terrain within which my paper is situated – journeying and fruitfulness. Francis paints a prismatic image of the story of salvation that is at one and the same time a journey through time, a process of gestation and growth like the child in the womb, and a fecundity of living like the maternal body. In all these images, the human individual in his or her cultural context and the body of the church are involved in a continuous process of movement, development and change. So let me turn now to consider how this plays out in the context of his claim that ‘Time is greater than space’.

Time is greater than space

As Philip McCosker rightly cautions elsewhere in this journal,¹³ we cannot push Francis’s contrast between time and space too far or take it literally, because we never experience time without space. However, we need to remember that Francis is not concerned with presenting theology as a series of systematic arguments or rational propositions. His language is poetic and evocative, a colourful assemblage of metaphors intended to evoke a response and inspire action among ordinary people, rather than an exercise in intellectual persuasion for theological elites. In *Evangelii Gaudium* he affirms the importance of doing theology ‘in dialogue with other sciences and human experiences’, but goes on to caution against ‘a desk-bound theology’ that forgets the Church’s *raison d’être* of evangelization (*EG* §133).

In privileging time over space, Francis seeks to balance the ‘constant tension ... between fullness and limitation. Fullness evokes the desire for complete possession, while limitation is a wall set before us’ (*EG* §222). To experience ourselves in time is to accept the limitation of each passing moment, without ever losing sight of the connectedness of time that draws us forward in hope. It is to be patient in order to cope with failure and finitude, to remain conscious of the promise of the future while dealing with the inevitable difficulties and obstacles of the present. It enables us to live, says Francis, ‘poised between each individual moment and the greater, brighter horizon of the utopian future as the final cause which draws us to itself’ (*EG* §222). To give priority to time is to be ‘concerned about initiating processes rather than possessing spaces. Time governs spaces, illumines them and makes them links in a constantly expanding chain, with no possibility of return’ (*EG* §223).

By contrast, the socio-political activity of our present world order is, Francis argues, sometimes dominated by the privileging of space over time – by short-term goals which result in ‘madly attempting to keep everything together in the present, trying to possess all the spaces of power and of self assertion’. This is, he says, ‘to crystallize processes and presume to hold them back’ (*EG* §223). Francis’s concern throughout *Evangelii Gaudium* is with the temporal processes by way of which human endeavours bear fruit and seeds of transformation are given time to develop and grow in the incarnational contexts of people’s lives.

Space precludes any in-depth exploration of the intellectual hinterland to Francis’s understanding of the question of time and space – a question that was a major preoccupation of early twentieth century thinkers such as Henri Bergson, Sigmund Freud and Marcel Proust, and of course Martin Heidegger. However, it is worth noting that, in the interview he gave in September 2013 to Antonio Spadaro, S.J., editor in chief of the Italian Jesuit journal, *La Civiltà Cattolica*,¹⁴ Francis refers to the little-known French novelist, Joseph Malègue (1876-1940). Malègue was deeply influenced by Bergson,¹⁵ so at least implicitly, we might detect early twentieth century phenomenological concerns with the nature of time in relation to space, even if these influences should not be exaggerated.

A more important factor in Francis’s emphasis on time and process is the significance of discernment for the formation of Ignatian spirituality – a theme to which he repeatedly returns. In the Spadaro interview he says that ‘the wisdom of discernment redeems the necessary ambiguity of life’. He also in that interview touches on the theme of time and space, of process, in the context of revelation in history and of history as revelation. He observes that, ‘We must initiate processes rather than occupy spaces. God manifests himself in time and is present in the processes of history. This gives priority to actions that give birth to new historical dynamics. And it requires patience, waiting.’

Themes of patience and mercy go hand in hand with those of process and discernment. In the Spadaro interview, Francis speaks of patience in terms of ‘the common sanctity’ of the people of God. In *Evangelii Gaudium* he argues that ‘Evangelization consists mostly of patience and disregard for constraints of time’ (*EG* §24). Those who accompany others in faith ‘need to accompany with mercy and patience the eventual stages of personal growth as these progressively occur’ (*EG* §44).

Mercy, then, is intrinsic to the related themes of process, patience and discernment. If we want to see how all this finds practical expression in Francis’s style of leadership, we might consider his declaration of 2016 as a Holy Year of Mercy, in the context of the second of his four principles – ‘unity prevails over conflict’ (§ 226-30).

The Holy Year of Mercy follows upon the two Synods on the Family, in October 2014 and October 2015. By calling these a year apart, Francis initiated a process in 2014 where he brought to the surface all the tensions, conflicts and challenges that have been fermenting among the church’s leaders in recent years. This is a quest for healing and harmonisation not through the avoidance of conflict, but through facing it head on and going through a tense and painful process of seeking resolution. By declaring 2016 a year of mercy, Francis seeks to shift the church from a journey of intense but necessary struggle to a journey of forgiveness and reconciliation.

This is a model of church leadership that makes manifest his fundamental theological beliefs about time and space, discernment and process, patience and mercy. Respect for process leads him to seek a middle road – neither an artificially imposed unity nor an irreconcilable conflict, but a process of struggling towards

reconciliation, towards a solidarity which, ‘in its deepest and most challenging sense, ... becomes a way of making history in a life setting where conflicts, tensions and oppositions can achieve a diversified and life-giving unity’ (*EG* §228). Whether or not this is a Hegelian view of history depends on how we read Hegel.¹⁶ Francis’s vision of history is not in any sense directed towards the overcoming of diversity. It is rooted in ‘the conviction that the unity brought by the Spirit can harmonize every diversity’ (*EG* §230). This is not only a movement between peoples but also within ourselves. Citing Gospel passages which refer to the unity, peace and reconciliation offered by Christ, Francis observes that ‘the locus of this reconciliation of differences is within ourselves, in our own lives, ever threatened as they are by fragmentation and breakdown. If hearts are shattered in thousands of pieces, it is not easy to create authentic peace in society’ (*EG* §230).

Mystery and Eternity

So far, one might ask if Francis is could be described as a process theologian – a movement that developed out of Alfred Whitehead’s philosophy, which now embraces a wide diversity of theological perspectives.¹⁷ In his emphasis on relationality and on the significance of history for our human understanding of God, there are certainly points of commonality between Francis and process theologians. However, process theology entails the dissolution of the radical otherness of God in relation to the world. God and humanity are co-dependent, and there is no divine being beyond human becoming.

Francis is a mystical theologian and a Thomist, and this situates him in an entirely different and more traditional theological context from that of process theology, even as he seeks the transformation of that tradition from within. His emphasis on the importance of time and process entails at every turn a radical openness to the God who comes to meet us, who interrupts us on the way, who renders mysterious the mundane realities of time and space by penetrating them with an unfathomable and eternal otherness.

In his proclamation of the Holy Year of Mercy, Francis takes the refrain from Psalm 136 – ‘For his mercy endures forever’ (*MV* §7).¹⁸ The repetition of this refrain, he says, ‘seems to break through the dimensions of space and time, inserting everything into the eternal mystery of love’ (*MV* §7). This is not a dissolution of God’s eternal being into the process of human becoming. It is rather a co-dependent duality of time – a call to discern the timeless presence of God within the temporal affairs of history. In the Spadaro interview, Francis acknowledges that his insistence on the need to encounter God in the present, ‘walking, along the path’, might be interpreted as a form of relativism. It would be relativism if it amounted to ‘a kind of indistinct pantheism’, but not if we understand it in the biblical sense, ‘that God is always a surprise, so you never know where and how you will find him. ... You must, therefore, discern the encounter. Discernment is essential.’ This God of surprises – another of Francis’s favoured images – distinguishes his theology from the ‘indistinct pantheism’ of process theology. The Christian life, as Francis portrays it, is a journey to the far horizons, lived out on the edge of the receding horizon of eternity. He tells Spadaro, ‘You cannot bring home the frontier, but you have to live on the border and be audacious.’ This call to be audacious means being creative and imaginative, and it also means embracing the risk and the doubt of faith. Like Saint Augustine, we must ‘seek God to find him, and find God to keep searching for God forever.’ Our

journeying is often a journey where we feel blind, but it is also a journey in which God comes to meet us in our quest – ‘God is always first and makes the first move.’

History unfolds as salvation and participates in the mystery of God without that mystery ever collapsing into the mundane. Yet all we can know of God we discover through contemplation on the self-revelation of God as history. This comes together in a vivid and intense way in the theophany of the Mass, where we encounter God as really present. In a daily Mass reflection, Francis speaks of ‘putting ourselves ... in God’s time, in God’s space, without looking at our watches. The liturgy is precisely entering into the mystery of God.’¹⁹ This acute sensitivity to the mystery and otherness of God gives Francis a deeper theological perspective than that of many postconciliar liberal theologians as well as process theologians. In the Spadaro interview, he expresses his closeness to Jesuit mystics such as Louis Lallement, Jean-Joseph Surin and Peter Faber. He links this to ‘The mystical dimension of discernment [that] never defines its edges and does not complete the thought.’

In all this, however, we might ask how Francis accounts for the inescapably spatial dimension of incarnation – material bodies occupy spaces even as they are caught up in the slipstream of time as it flows towards the mystery of God. Here, we have to turn not only to Francis’s passionate concern for social justice engaged with the messy realities of material life in its poorest and most abject situations, but also to his insistence upon the incarnational significance of cultures and local communities.

Culture and Incarnation

Francis speaks of ‘a *mystical* fraternity, a contemplative fraternity’, constituting ‘a fraternal love capable of seeing the sacred grandeur of our neighbour, of finding God in every human being’ (*EG* §92). This refers to the vocation to neighbourly love and social justice, but it can also be read in the context of Francis’s emphasis on culture as the privileged locus of incarnation.

Inculturation flourished in the aftermath of Vatican II, with the widespread adaptation of liturgies to accommodate local forms of cultural expression. However, this trend enjoyed little support during the papacy of John Paul II, and it was actively discouraged under the papacy of Benedict.

According to Francis, ‘The People of God is incarnate in the peoples of the earth, each of which has its own culture’ (*EG* §115). As individuals, we derive our identities and our experience of God within our different cultures, for ‘Grace supposes culture, and God’s gift becomes flesh in the culture of those who receive it’ (*EG* §115). It is interesting to note how Francis substitutes culture for nature here, in the more familiar Thomist axiom that grace supposes nature.

The Holy Spirit works to bring communion and harmony within and among our diverse cultures, but evangelization requires inculturation – the adaptation of the Christian message so that it reflects and transforms the cultures within which it is incarnate. Once again, we see the importance of history and temporality for this vision:

Culture is a dynamic reality which a people constantly recreates; each generation passes on a whole series of ways of approaching different existential situations to the next generation, which must in turn reformulate it as it confronts its own challenges (*EG* §122).

For Francis, communities and cultures constitute the incarnate living out of the history of salvation. In the Spadaro interview, he says that ‘No one is saved alone, as an isolated individual, for God draws us to himself through the complex web of interpersonal relationships which constitute the human community. God enters into this dynamic of the people.’ This is the context in which we need to understand his references to popular piety as ‘the people’s mysticism ... a spirituality incarnated in the culture of the lowly’ (EG §124) – terms that he takes from the Aparecida document of which, as Cardinal Bergoglio, he was one of the main authors.²⁰ Popular piety is, he says, a ‘*locus theologicus* which demands our attention’ (EG §126).

We can explore Francis’s emphasis on the significance of culture in the context of the fourth of his principles – ‘the whole is greater than the part’ – where he addresses the ‘innate tension ... between globalization and localization’ (EG §234). To reconcile the particular and the global requires us to affirm different cultures and contexts without getting caught up in the glitter of ‘an abstract, globalized universe’ or turning our culture ‘into a museum of local folklore ... incapable of being challenged by novelty or appreciating the beauty which God bestows beyond their borders’ (EG §234). This means we need ‘to sink our roots deeper into the fertile soil and history of our native place, which is a gift of God. We can work on a small scale, in our own neighbourhood, but with a larger perspective’ (EG §235; see also LS §).

This theological vision of a temporal, communal, incarnational unfolding of the story of salvation is woven upon the loom of the doctrine of the Trinity. Human beings are essentially relational with regard to one another and to God, working through the Holy Spirit: “The very mystery of the Trinity reminds us that we have been created in the image of that divine communion, and so we cannot achieve salvation or fulfilment purely by our own efforts” (EG §178). Cultural diversity is not a threat but, when open to the Holy Spirit, participates in the ‘perfect communion of the blessed Trinity, where all things find their unity’ (EG § 117). This is true not just for humans, but for the whole of creation. In *Laudato Si’*, Francis writes that

The human person grows more, matures more and is sanctified more to the extent that he or she enters into relationships, going out from themselves to live in communion with God, with others and with all creatures. In this way, they make their own that Trinitarian dynamism which God imprinted in them when they were created. Everything is interconnected, and this invites us to develop a spirituality of that global solidarity which flows from the mystery of the Trinity (LS §240).

Francis’s account of historical becoming is not a dialectical struggle between the one and the many, but a reconciling movement through time towards the communion of all created beings in the mystery of the Trinity.

This brings me to the last part of my paper, where I am more critical of Francis’s thought. How far does his preference for maternal ecclesiology cohere with his understanding of revelation as history, and what does this say with regard to the place of women in Francis’s church?

The Church as mother

In a general audience, Francis declared himself ‘extremely fond of [the] image of the Church as mother.’²¹ Developing this theme, he speaks of the mother who shows her children ‘the right path to take through life ... with tenderness, affection, and love’

(GA §1). When the children grow up, the mother continues to accompany them with patience, following them with discretion, always ready to defend them, always giving of herself, always praying for her children and entrusting them to God.

Themes of journeying along a path with patience, mercy and discernment are implicit here too, but the mother, in this model, is not the wayfarer but the guide. That is a potentially rich image of the church. However, for real mothers attempting the complex and challenging task of mothering and often getting it wrong, this may not be a helpful image if there is no creative gap between mundane reality and imaginative sacramentality. The maternal church as represented by Francis is neither inculturated nor contextualised within the incarnate experiences and relationships of maternal life. Rather, mothers are assumed to behave in ways that conform to a model of the ideal church. Women have yet to find a meaningful place in Francis's church, whether or not they are mothers.

In a doctoral thesis on the motherhood of the church, Cristina Lledo Gomez has shown how, in the early church, maternal ecclesial metaphors drew their potency from their capacity to break open existing, culturally constructed expressions of motherhood to new meanings. In the documents of Vatican II and in the contemporary church, on the other hand, she argues that there is no such connection to culturally recognisable models. The motherhood of the church has become a 'dead' metaphor, as this term is understood in Janet Soskice's work on metaphor.²²

Alongside his unrealistic representation of motherhood, there is a more fundamental problem to do with Francis's appropriation of maternal language to describe roles from which women are excluded on account of their female bodies. For example, in *Evangelii Gaudium* he writes about homiletics under the title '*A mother's conversation*'. The church 'preaches in the same way that a mother speaks to her child' (EG §139). The Christian faith must be communicated in 'our "mother culture," our native language', (EG §139) in a setting that is 'both maternal and ecclesial' (Eg §140).

This inculturated preaching requires a synthesis that comes from the passionate heart of the preacher, rather than 'ideas or detached values' (EG §143). Yet the idea of a priest speaking as a mother, in a role that female bodies are prohibited from occupying, is detached from any incarnate maternal context. What does it mean to insist upon the affective dimension of preaching as a maternal activity, if women's bodies are denied sacramental significance? Francis's richly incarnational vision unravels in the face of such abstractions.

Francis has reiterated the teaching that the question of women's ordination is closed (EG §104). According to canon law, only priests and deacons are permitted to preach the homily during the Mass,²³ so women cannot initiate the mother's conversation that is the homily. Francis speaks of the 'fleshy' devotions of popular religiosity (EG §90), but female fleshiness bars women from speaking when the maternal voice is heard in the context of the Mass, which is at the very heart of Catholic devotional life.

The idea of a maternal ecclesiology finds its focus in Mary – 'the Mother of the Church which evangelizes' (EG §284). Mary walks with us on our journey to God – she 'shares the history of each people which has received the Gospel and she becomes a part of their historic identity' (EG § 286). These familiar themes of history and journeying shape Francis's understanding of Mary, who 'let herself be guided by the Holy Spirit on a journey of faith towards a destiny of service and fruitfulness' (EG §287). Mary is Jesus's gift to the church from the cross, 'because he did not want us

to journey without a mother ... The Lord did not want to leave the Church without this icon of womanhood' (*EG* §285).

This language of the icon is particularly problematic, given that similar language is used to justify the exclusion of women from the sacramental priesthood on the basis that the priest is an icon of Christ.²⁴ In the latter sense, the icon is exclusive – only men can be icons. However, in the former sense it is inclusive – men as well as women are called to be mothers or indeed women, since the mother is in this case 'an icon of womanhood'. I might go one step further and ask if even the womanly icon is exclusive to the male body. The icon is a work of art, a transformation of natural materials into a medium that mediates something of the presence of the divine beyond mere representation.²⁵ Where language really matters – where language becomes fleshy and bodies become sacraments – only male bodies count. In the maternal church, men are the true 'icons of womanhood' – the priests who occupy the sacramental role of the mother – just as they are the icons of Christ. Women's bodies, lacking iconic significance, are confined to the biological function of the womb, a mammalian function that fails to transform the animality of the human creature into the sacramentality of the person as icon of Christ.

The elision of any significant distinction between womanhood and motherhood means that women remain trapped in function of the womb – the role of providing space for others, while never occupying their own time and space in the human story. In other words, defined within this symbolics of the maternal, women do not change and develop through time, we do not incarnate the revelation of God in our particular cultures and contexts, but remain always available as the repository of men's fantasies of maternal nurture and feminine genius.²⁶ Addressing women at an event organised by the Pontifical Council for Culture, Francis said, 'You, women, know how to show the tender face of God, his mercy, which translates in the availability to give time more than to occupy spaces, to welcome rather than to exclude. In this sense, I like to describe the feminine dimension of the Church as a welcoming womb that regenerates life.'²⁷

This reiterates the themes of time and space I have been exploring in this paper. Yet what does it mean to say that women are available 'to give time more than to occupy spaces'? And how can we square this with being likened to 'a welcoming womb that regenerates life'? Surely, in the latter image, the womb is a space within which time unfolds? I am not suggesting that these informal observations and conversations should in themselves be given too much weight, but taken together they are revealing of Francis's underlying mentality when it comes to reflecting on the place of women in the church.

As Luce Irigaray suggests in her disruptive interventions into the western philosophical and theological traditions, 'the feminine is experienced as space, ... while the masculine is experienced as time'.²⁸ Irigaray refers to Kant's identification of temporality with the interiority of the subject and space with exteriority. Francis's subject is a more dynamic model than Kant's, but his ambulatory historical subject still looks to the womb/woman/mother/church to provide the space of his redemption, the space of his coming to be in God. For Irigaray, masculinity signifies the enclosure and sealing of spaces, whether these are the bodily boundaries of the modern subject, or the sealed boundaries that mark out property and territory in the modern capitalist state. She observes that 'their fatherland, family, home, discourse, imprison us in enclosed spaces where we cannot keep on moving, living, as ourselves. Their properties are our exile.'²⁹ This as an apt criticism to level at Francis, for while he seeks to render porous these masculine boundaries, the female body remains on the

outside of the sealed borders of sacramental significance, unable to move because she is the space for his becoming, his dynamism.

Maternal Reconciling

I suggested in the first part of this essay that Francis's vision of a mystical, maternal church has the potential to enrich the ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council, restoring the sense of the church as 'a container and guardian of mysteries far greater than itself', which was sacrificed to the more politicised agendas of the postconciliar era. At the same time, Francis not only preserves but deepens and develops the sense of the pilgrim people of God called to radical solidarity with the poor and the marginalised in their journey through time.

However, if this restoration of the maternal church is not simply to perpetuate the nostalgic romanticisms of his two predecessors – John Paul II in particular – then women need to be liberated from bearing the burden of an archaic yearning associated with the maternal relationship, in order to play a full and equal role as persons in the church. Of course, the maternal body is female, but not every female is maternal, and a mother is a person before she is a mother.

Symbols of motherhood and fatherhood, of phallic power and maternal nurture, constitute the complex scaffolding of the human spirit with regard to some of our deepest desires and fears. These desires and fears are ineluctably entangled with the sexual bodies that we are, but gender is a fluid linguistic concept that allows the sexed body some finite freedom to give expression to a range of relationships and identities. Sacramentally, gendered identities are not tied to particular sexual bodies. They acquire a poetic potency which enables them to give expression to our most profound desires, our most unattainable yearnings, woven around the imagined ideal of the perfect lover, mother or father. This is the language of contemplative prayer and mystical insight, when the self is lost in Christ in a way that finds partial expression through the appropriation of metaphors of nuptial and parental union, both paternal and maternal.

In the liturgy of the Mass, the fecundity of the fatherhood and motherhood of God become an expression of our hope, drawing on the most evocative and resonant symbols of birth, identity, desire, intimacy and belonging to give an opaque sense of the hope that draws us forward through time towards the far horizon of eternity. This is the movement of which Marilyn Robinson speaks in her novel *Housekeeping*, when she writes,

The force behind the movement of time is a mourning that will not be comforted. That is why the first event is known to have been an expulsion, and the last is hoped to be a reconciliation and return. So memory pulls us forward, so prophecy is only brilliant memory – there will be a garden where all of us as one child will sleep in our mother Eve, hooped in her ribs and staved by her spine.³⁰

Francis describes the believer as 'essentially one who remembers' (*EG* §13). Psychoanalysis tells us that remembering is more than a stringing together of events. It is our personal, unconscious history of desire, which is 'remembered' in our drives and our instincts, in our dreams and our nightmares, suffusing our conscious memories with an uncanny bodily otherness and allowing intimations of a dark desire to ooze through the linguistic and social structures of our ordered worlds.

To bring such psychoanalytic insights to our understanding of sacramentality is in no way to deny that God, the transcendent Other, is the source of these elusive desires. It is rather to realize that holiness and madness, the mystic and the hysteric, dwell within each of us as the tabernacle wherein we encounter the God beyond all knowing and naming.

David Power describes sacramental ritual as a 'language event' with a disruptive capacity to traverse boundaries and to interrupt the predictable rhythms of our daily routines. Rituals are, writes Power, 'Disclosures of human vulnerability and incompleteness. Bodily rites, in their very intensity of rhythm, bring to the surface the modes of being in time and space, together with the tensions inherent to the condition of being human.' He describes sacramental celebration as a linguistic excess that entails orality beyond the written word, so that speech is opened up to otherness and marginality.

There are deep resonances between Power's account of liturgy and Francis's understanding of popular piety as a '*locus theologicus*'. Yet such linguistic freedom and creativity is necessarily constrained when it must also police its boundaries in order to keep the female body at bay, excluding it from any participation in the church's performative maternal rituals of preaching and teaching, guiding and nurturing, worshipping and consecrating.

The alternative is to recognise that the priestly body makes sacramentally present that mystery of union discovered in Trinitarian relationality that is the deepest desire of our human hearts. Neither father nor mother, male nor female, this body occupies God's time, God's space. It is a theophany in which the individual steps back from the mundane body in order to let the sacramental body manifest its mystery. The pilgrim seeks sabbath rest from his or her journey through time, drawing nourishment and inspiration from the maternal body of Christ made flesh in Mary in the order of temporality and in the Eucharist in the order of sacramentality, in order to mother others along the pilgrim path of time.

In the postconciliar church, the pilgrim people of God travel through the time-space continuum of Trinitarian otherness, manifest to us in the sacramentality of all creation and in the theophany of the Mass wherein we become what we are not yet, before and beyond all that we know ourselves to be. This constitutes both immanence and transcendence, blindness and revelation, knowing and unknowing. It is the direction that Francis's vision could move in, if he acknowledged the iconic, sacramental potency of the female flesh.

Notes:

¹ Pope Francis, 'Apostolic Exhortation on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today's World (*Evangelii Gaudium*), 24 November 2013,

http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html, accessed 3 August 2015.

² Pope Benedict XVI, 'Address to the Roman Curia Offering Them His Christmas Greetings', Thursday, 22 December 2005, http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2005/december/documents/hf_ben_xvi_spe_20051222_roman-curia.html, accessed 25 June 2015.

³ Pope Benedict XVI, 'Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation on the Eucharist as the Source and Summit of the Church's Life and Mission' (*Sacramentum Caritatis*), 22 February 2007, http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_ben-

[xvi_exh_20070222_sacramentum-caritatis.html](#), accessed 25 June 2015. See also Tracey Rowland, 'Vatican II: A Hermeneutic of Continuity or Reform?', *Crisis Magazine*, November 15, 2012, <http://www.crisismagazine.com/2012/vatican-ii-a-hermeneutic-of-continuity-or-reform>, accessed 25 June 2015.

⁴ Cf. Cristina Nava Lledo Gomez, *The Church as Mother: The Maternal Ecclesial Metaphor in the Vatican II Documents*, unpublished doctoral thesis, Charles Sturt University, Sydney, Australia, 2015; Joseph Conrad Plumpe, *Mater Ecclesia: An Inquiry into the Concept of the Church as Mother in Early Christianity*. The Catholic University of America Studies in Christian Antiquity (Washington DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1943).

⁵ Cf. Elizabeth Johnson, 'Mary and Contemporary Christology: Rahner and Schillebeeckx', *Église et Théologie* 15 (1984): pp. 155-82.

⁶ See Tina Beattie, *New Catholic Feminism: Theology and Theory* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006). See also Fergus Kerr, *Twentieth-Century Catholic Theologians: From Neoscholasticism to Nuptial Mysticism* (Malden MA and Oxford UK: Blackwell Publishing, 2007).

⁷ Charlene Spretnak, *Missing Mary: The Queen of Heaven and Her Re-Emergence in the Modern Church* (New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 9. See also Beattie, *God's Mother Eve's Advocate: A Marian Narrative of Women's Salvation* (London and New York: Continuum, 2002); Sarah Jane Boss, *Empress and Handmaid: Nature and Gender in the Cult of the Virgin Mary* (London and New York: Cassell, 2000).

⁸ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Elucidations*, trans. John Riches (London: SPCK, 1975), p. 70.

⁹ Junno Arocho Esteves, "'Evangelii Gaudium'" (The Joy of the Gospel) Released Today', 26 November 2013, Zenit.org, <http://www.zenit.org/en/articles/evangelii-gaudium-the-joy-of-the-gospel-released-today>, accessed 28 July 2015.

¹⁰ Pope Francis, 'We are history', Morning Meditation in the Chapel of the *Domus Sanctae Marthae*, Thursday, 18 December 2014, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/cotidie/2014/documents/papa-francesco-cotidie_20141218_we-are-history.html, accessed 23 June 2015.

¹¹ Pope Francis, Encyclical Letter on Care for Our Common Home, *Laudato Si'*, 24 May 2015, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html, accessed 30 July 2015.

¹² Isaac of Stella, *Sermo* 51: PL 194, 1863, 1865.

¹³ Philip McCosker, 'From the Joy of the Gospel to the Joy of Christ: Situating and Expanding Pope Francis' Christology', [full reference to be inserted]

¹⁴ See Antonio Spadaro, S.J., 'A Big Heart Open to God', *America*, 30 September 2013 (<http://www.americamagazine.org/pope-interview>) accessed 20 January 2014. All subsequent quotations are from this online translation of the interview.

¹⁵ See William Marceau, *Henri Bergson et Joseph Malègue: La Convergence de Deux Pensées*, Stanford French and Italian Studies (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 1987).

¹⁶ Cf. McCosker, 'From the Joy of the Gospel to the Joy of Christ', p. ?

¹⁷ Cf. John B. Cobb, *A Christian Natural Theology: Based on the Thought of Alfred North Whitehead*, second edition (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007); David Ray Griffin, 'Reconstructive Theology' in Kevin J. Vanhoozer (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology* (Cambridge UK and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 92-108.

¹⁸ Pope Francis, 'Bull of Indiction of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy', *Misericordiae Vultus*, 11 April 2015, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_letters/documents/papa-francesco_bolla_20150411_misericordiae-vultus.html, accessed 1 August 2015.

¹⁹ Pope Francis, 'At Mass without a watch' – Morning Meditation in the Chapel of the *Domus Sanctae Marthae*, Tuesday, 10 February 2014, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/cotidie/2014/documents/papa-francesco-cotidie_20140210_mass-without-watch.html, accessed 14 June 2015.

²⁰ Fifth General Conference of the Latin American and Caribbean Bishops, *Aparecida Document*, 29 June 2007.

²¹ Pope Francis, 'General Audience', Saint Peter's Square, 18 September 2013, https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2013/documents/papa-francesco_20130918_udienza-generale.html, accessed 1 August 2015.

²² Gomez, *The Church as Mother*. See Janet Martin Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language* (Oxford/London/New York: Clarendon Press/Oxford University Press, 1985).

²³ *Code of Canon Law*, Book III, Chapter 1, Can. 767, §1, <http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG1104/P2J.HTM>, accessed 1 August 2015.

²⁴ Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Part Two, Section One, Chapter Two, Article 1, §1142, <http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/P37.HTM>, accessed 1 August 2015. See also Sacred

Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 'Declaration on the Question of Admission of Women to the Ministerial Priesthood', *Inter Insigniores*, 15 October 1976, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19761015_inter-insigniores_en.html, accessed 1 August 2015.

²⁵ See Thomas J. McGovern, *Priestly Identity: A Study in the Theology of Priesthood* (Eugene OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2010), pp. 81-83.

²⁶ For further development of these ideas, see Beattie, *God's Mother, Eve's Advocate*.

²⁷ Elise Harris, 'Society's dire need for the "female soul" – Pope Francis speaks to women', *Catholic News Agency*, 7 February 2015, <http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/societys-dire-need-for-the-female-soul-pope-francis-speaks-to-women-20605/>, accessed 1 August 2015.

²⁸ Luce Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, trans Carolyn Burke and Gillian C. Gill (London and New York: Continuum, 2004), p. 9.

²⁹ Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 212.

³⁰ Marilynne Robinson, *Housekeeping* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1980), p. 192.