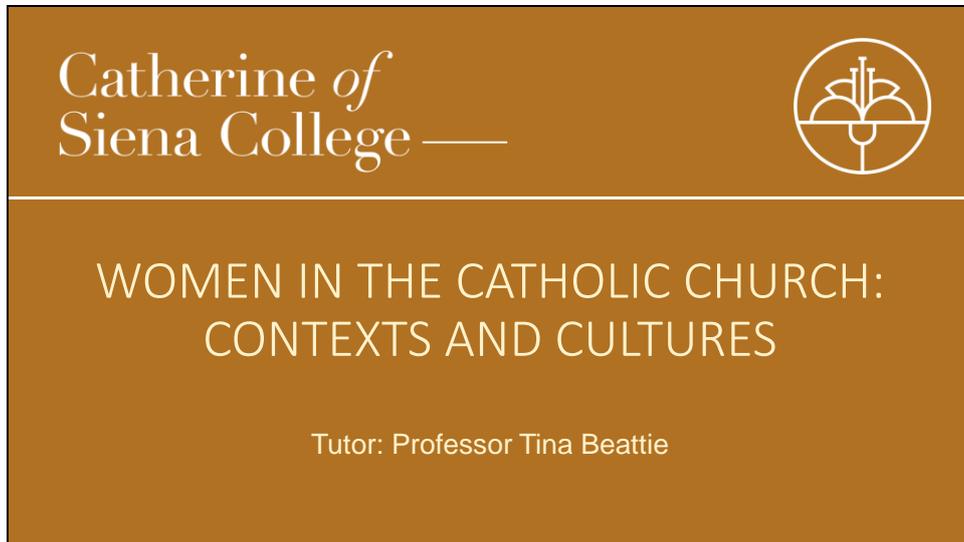


WOMEN IN THE CATHOLIC CHURCH: CONTEXTS AND CULTURES

TRANSCRIPT OF LECTURE – WEEK 4

Slide 1



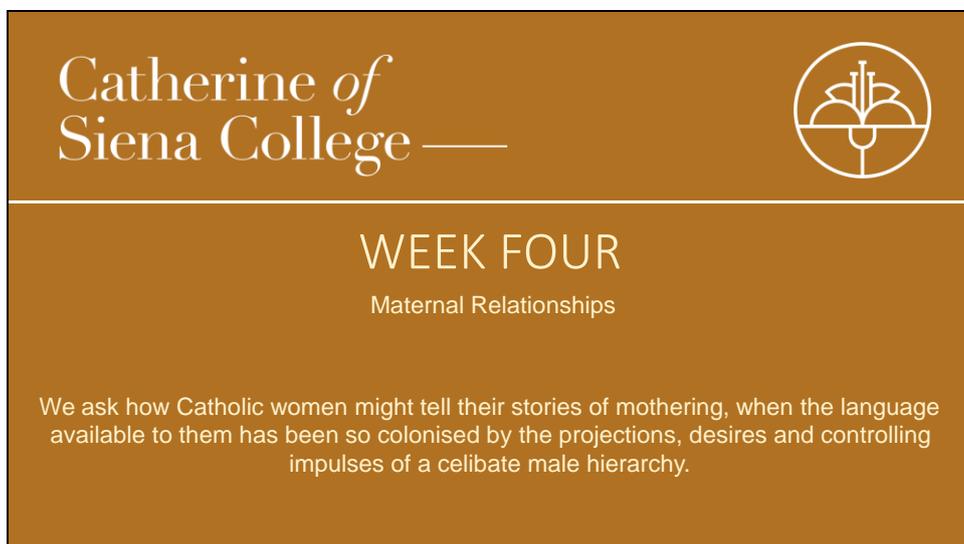
Catherine of
Siena College — 

WOMEN IN THE CATHOLIC CHURCH:
CONTEXTS AND CULTURES

Tutor: Professor Tina Beattie

Welcome back to Week 4 of “Women in the Catholic Church: Contexts and Cultures”, taught by Tina Beattie.

Slide 2



Catherine of
Siena College — 

WEEK FOUR
Maternal Relationships

We ask how Catholic women might tell their stories of mothering, when the language available to them has been so colonised by the projections, desires and controlling impulses of a celibate male hierarchy.

This week our theme is “Maternal Relationships”. We ask how Catholic women might tell their stories of mothering – as mothers or daughters or both – when the language available to them has been so colonised by the projections, desires and controlling impulses of a celibate male hierarchy.

When we talk about mothering, we are talking about a universal relationship. Every human being has been born of a mother, which is why in the early Church Christ’s birth from Mary was the defining hallmark of his humanity. Psychoanalysis tells us that both sexes have a complex and often turbulent relationship to the mother figure, whose symbolic and maternal

presence is projected onto ordinary women's bodies in ways that can have deeply problematic psycho-sexual and social effects.

That makes the task of reflecting on motherhood very difficult when we are using ideas of narrative identity and story-telling. What language can we use to speak of maternal relationships, when so much of it is freighted with theological and psychological baggage?

Slide 3

POPE FRANCIS, *AMORIS LAETITIA* (2016)

“The woman stands before the man as a mother, the subject of the new human life that is conceived and develops in her, and from her is born into the world. The weakening of this maternal presence with its feminine qualities poses a grave risk to our world. I certainly value feminism, but one that does not demand uniformity or negate motherhood. For the grandeur of women includes all the rights derived from their inalienable human dignity but also from their feminine genius, which is essential to society. Their specifically feminine abilities – motherhood in particular – also grant duties, because womanhood entails a specific mission in this world, a mission that society needs to protect and preserve for the good of all.” (AL 173)



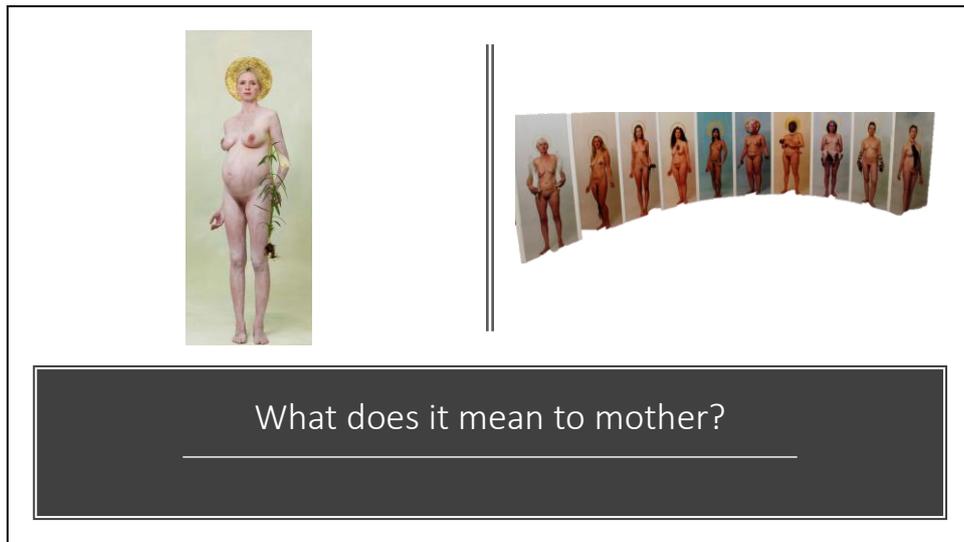
In 2017, I invited a group of school girls aged between 14 and 17 from a Catholic high school in London to a study day on Pope Francis's post-apostolic exhortation on the family, *Amoris Laetitia*. The result of that day was the letter to Pope Francis, published in *Visions and Vocations*. We focused on one particular paragraph, quoted on this slide:

The woman stands before the man as a mother, the subject of the new human life that is conceived and develops in her, and from her is born into the world. The weak-ening of this maternal presence with its femi-nine qualities poses a grave risk to our world. I certainly value feminism, but one that does not demand uniformity or negate motherhood. For the grandeur of women includes all the rights derived from their inalienable human dignity but also from their feminine genius, which is essen-tial to society. Their specifically feminine abilities – motherhood in particular – also grant duties, because womanhood entails a specific mis-sion in this world, a mission that society needs to protect and preserve for the good of all. (AL 173)

The girls reacted strongly to some of the assumptions and stereotypes in that paragraph, even as they affirmed their respect for Pope Francis and what he is doing in the Church. You might like to read their letter, particularly the section titled “Missions, motherhood and ‘feminine genius’”. We’ll refer back to that later.

Perhaps you’d like to reflect on that paragraph and note down your reactions.

Slide 4



The image I've chosen for this slide is Ione Rucquoi's startling work of installation art called *Sanctae*. Rucquoi photographed 10 naked women whose bodies bear the scars and wounds, the fluids and contours of pregnancy, birth and motherhood. Each of the women wears a halo. The woman in the main picture is called "Kate". She holds an uprooted lily – symbol of the Virgin Mary's purity – which has been dissected to show the inside of the flower, suggesting the parts of a woman's body that are usually denied and negated in representations of Mary.

You can see more of Rucquoi's work and read about her at the link in this week's Moodle site. She represents one of a new generation of women artists who are reclaiming the visual and symbolic significance of maternal bodies.

You might want to reflect on your own reaction to images such as these.

Slide 5

In the Introduction to *Visions and Vocations*, Tina Beattie writes:

"Whether as mothers or as daughters, for many women the maternal relationship is one of life's most intense and complex challenges, shot through as it is with love and pain, hope and frustration, yearning and sorrow. The women who tell their stories here introduce a visceral reality into the abstract ideas that inform church teaching on motherhood. Eschewing romantic and often sanitizing stereotypes, they describe the vocation to mothering as a lifelong struggle to nurture hope and vitality in the face of the sometimes devastating demands of maternal love. Others write as daughters who remember their mothers as role models and sources of wisdom, or sometimes as obstacles on their path to life."



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Slide 6

SUSAN HARFORD, "WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO MOTHER?"

- Motherhood is both an act of faith and a presence
- Mothers navigate social waters with our children not for them
- Mothers help their children to reveal and develop their God-given gifts
- Mothers must bear witness to the ways our children face hurt and brutality
- Mothers perpetuate family lineage usually expressed in genealogical terms rooted in biology



Let's begin our reflections on mothering by looking at Susan Harford's essay in *Visions and Vocations*, "What does it mean to mother?"

As an adoptive mother, Susan identifies five aspects of what she calls "the mothering process" exemplified by "our maternal paragon, Holy Mother Mary":

- Motherhood is both an act of faith and a presence
- Mothers navigate social waters with our children not for them
- Mothers help their children to reveal and develop their God-given gifts
- Mothers must bear witness to the ways our children face hurt and brutality
- Mothers perpetuate family lineage usually expressed in genealogical terms rooted in biology

For women born and raised as Catholics, Susan's reference to Mary as an exemplar might already be a stumbling block, if Mary has been used as a form of indoctrination to make them submissive, modest and obedient.

Yet Mary is the only enduring symbol of maternal life in the western tradition. Even after her religious significance has been eclipsed for those who are members of Protestant churches or for those who do not identify themselves as Christian, she is an inescapable presence in the

art, music and architecture of European culture, and in Catholic cultures she remains a powerful if ambivalent symbol of motherhood.

For some Catholic women, maternal identities can be formed through and with the figure of Mary, if she is redeemed from the stereotypes and inhibitions of patriarchy. For others, maternal language must be rescued from the Marian tradition in order to enliven it anew with the lives of women who give birth or those who perform mothering roles in relation to others.

You might like to ask yourself which of these is more meaningful for you, and why? Is Mary a helpful resource for refiguring motherhood, or must there be a refiguration beyond Mary if women's experiences are to be honoured and represented?

Slide 7

REVAI "ELIZABETH" MUDZIMU, "MOTHERHOOD AS A MIRAGE"

"In Africa generally and in Zimbabwe, in particular, girls often find themselves caught in a conflict between traditional and modern attitudes towards motherhood. Catholic girls and women who want to become mothers have to grapple with their African culture and Catholic teachings, while at the same time wanting to respond to the promises and challenges of globalization. There is an idea that motherhood is an essential aspect of African womanhood, and failure to have children or to perform well as a mother can result in stigmatization. ... If the vocation to marriage and motherhood is to be meaningful, church teaching needs to be disseminated more effectively to the grassroots, and become more integrated into the current social, economic, cultural and technological environment."



From a different cultural perspective, Elizabeth Revai Mudzimu reflects on the challenges facing African women and girls who must navigate the sometimes conflicting demands of traditional culture, Catholic teachings and globalization. She argues that this leaves them ill-prepared for motherhood:

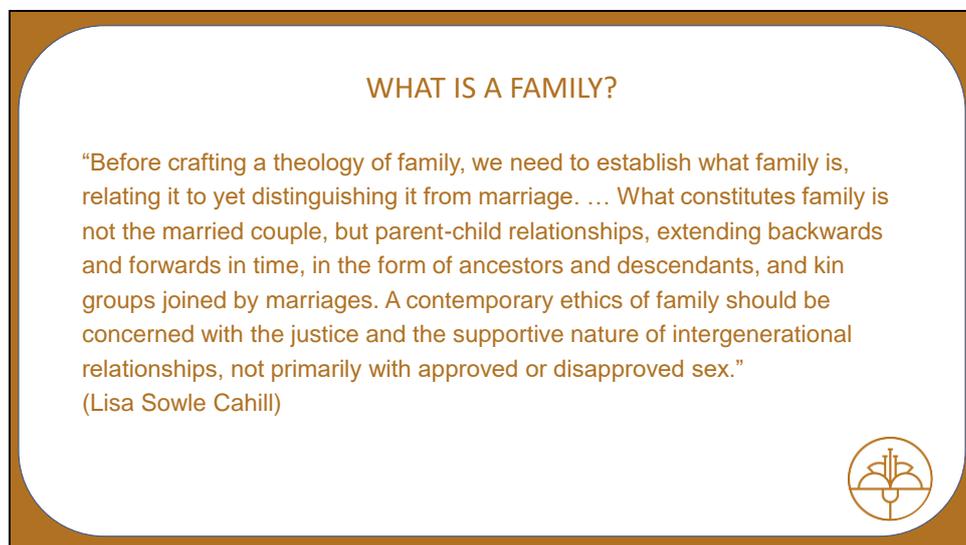
In Africa generally and in Zimbabwe, in particular, girls often find themselves caught in a conflict between traditional and modern attitudes towards motherhood. Catholic girls and women who want to become mothers have to grapple with their African culture and Catholic teachings, while at the same time wanting to respond to the promises and challenges of globalization. There is an idea that motherhood is an essential aspect of African womanhood, and failure to have children or to perform well as a mother can result in stigmatization. ... If the vocation to marriage and motherhood is to be meaningful, church teaching needs to be disseminated more effectively to the grassroots, and become more integrated into the current social, economic, cultural and technological environment.

If we go back to those five characteristics that Susan Harford associates with the maternal role, we might ask how effectively these would cross cultural boundaries to become a resource for female education and maternal formation in the kind of contexts Elizabeth describes:

- Motherhood is both an act of faith and a presence
- Mothers navigate social waters with our children not for them
- Mothers help their children to reveal and develop their God-given gifts
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- Mothers perpetuate family lineage usually expressed in genealogical terms rooted in biology

It seems to me that, while allowing for different cultural priorities and perspectives, these would provide a benchmark for educating girls in preparation for motherhood. We might also ask if they are equally important characteristics to cultivate in boys and men, in preparation for fatherhood.

Slide 8



Before we continue, maybe we should ask what we mean by a family. Susan describes an extended family network made up of adoptive and non-marital relationships. Elizabeth refers to many situations in which mothers in Africa fall outside the conventional norms of a married couple as the basis for a family.

Catholic teaching tends to address motherhood in the context of marriage and the modern nuclear family, in a way that fails to take into account the many different forms of domestic life that constitute families. Both Susan and Elizabeth present more complex and challenging accounts of family relationships. It might be helpful here to turn to an essay by Lisa Sowle Cahill in *Catholic Women Speak: Bringing Our Gifts to the Table*. Cahill writes:

Before crafting a theology of family, we need to establish what family is, relating it to yet distinguishing it from marriage. ... What constitutes family is not the married couple, but parent-child relationships, extending backwards and forwards in time, in the form of ancestors and descendants, and kin groups joined by marriages. A contemporary ethics of family should be concerned with the justice and the supportive nature of intergenerational relationships, not primarily with approved or disapproved sex.

Slide 9



Let's take some time for you to reflect on the foregoing, make some notes and perhaps post your ideas so far in the discussion forum.

Slide 10

SINGLE MOTHERS

Worldwide nearly one in every seven children under age 18 years - or 320 million children - is living in a single-parent household, mostly in mother-only families. ... Children raised in single-parent households generally do not have the same financial means, personal care and parental support available to them as those brought up in two-parent families. Consequently, children in single-parent families are frequently disadvantaged due to comparatively high levels of unemployment, poverty and poor health among such households. (Interpress Report on Single Parent Families)

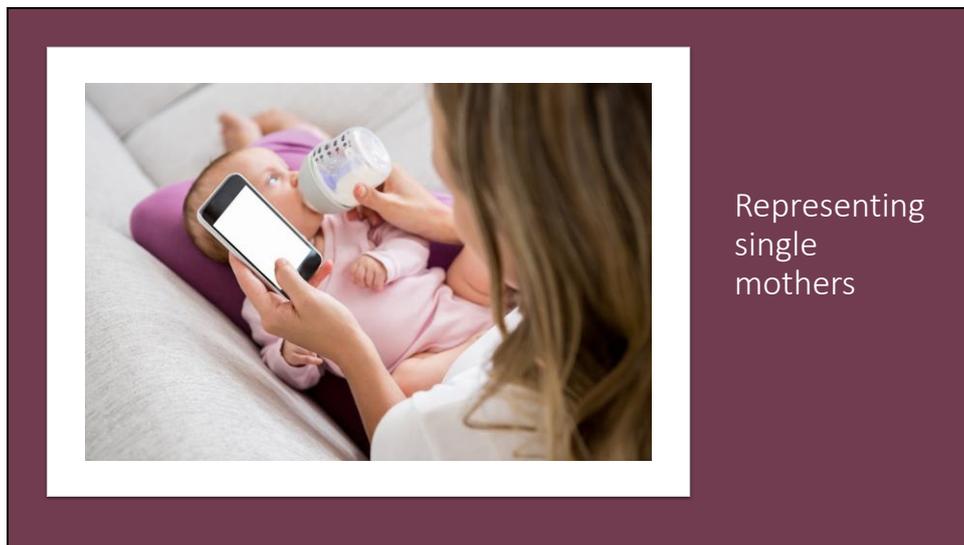


Let's turn to one of the most significant phenomena of the rapidly changing demographics of family life today, which is the increasing number of single parent households. A report on single parent families, which is available to download in this week's Moodle site, points out that "Worldwide nearly one in every seven children under age 18 years - or 320 million children - is living in a single-parent household, mostly in mother-only families." It goes on to claim that "Children raised in single-parent households generally do not have the same financial means, personal care and parental support available to them as those brought up in two-parent families. Consequently, children in single-parent families are frequently disadvantaged due to comparatively high levels of unemployment, poverty and poor health among such households."

Statements such as these can reveal deep prejudices against single mothers, subtly promoting the idea that two-parent families are the ideal without taking into consideration a wide range of factors that might invite a more nuanced analysis. While it is true that single mothers often face serious challenges and hardships, it's also true that they often provide models of maternal love and secure homes for their children which more than compensate for the absence of a father. In some cultures, networks of female relatives – aunts and sisters – provide the primary care givers for children.

We might also ask what these kind of negative representations say to the millions of children who grow up in households headed by a single parent, usually a woman.

Slide 11



This is a photograph that was used to illustrate an article in an Irish newspaper about single mothers. What does it tell you about underlying social attitudes with regard to single mothers and the ways in which they attend to their babies' needs?

Slide 12

URSULINE HIGH SCHOOL, "A LETTER TO POPE FRANCIS"

We do not see a "weakening of this maternal presence" that you refer to. On the contrary, we see lots of young people like us being brought up by their mothers alone. We looked up the statistics: "Around 90 per cent of single parents are women; the proportion who are men has remained at around 10 per cent for over a decade. Single fathers are more than twice as likely to be widowed as single mothers." In our experience young people are often being really well brought up just by their mothers. We see no mothers walking away and abandoning their children. Our Catholic mothers and grandmothers are our role models. Here is how one of our group described it:

I have felt more inspired by the inspirational Catholic women I know – particularly my grandmother and mother – than by what I hear in church on Sunday. They showed me what it means to be a strong woman and have given me the ideals and values I respect: caring, confidence, self-assurance, independence and – through hard-work and guidance – helping your family to flourish.



In their Letter to Pope Francis, the Ursuline school girls resisted the suggestion that there is a weakening of a maternal presence in the world. They cited single mothers as an example of good mothering, and they spoke of the importance of maternal role models.

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Not all contributors to the book describe the maternal relationship in such positive terms. Some are far more ambivalent about their mothers’ influences on their lives. You might like to pause and reflect on how you respond to these issues. How does the maternal relationship shape your sense of who you are and how you live out your faith or your beliefs about the world?

Slide 13

THÉRÈSE M. CRAINE BERTSCH, “CROSSING BORDERLINES”

“My research into American homeless mothers reveals that despite trauma, hurt, and intimidation, they are deeply spiritual and refuse to be victims. Their understanding of family emerges from their life’s circumstances, despite societal structures that fail to support impoverished families. ...Their stories reveal how “social locations are fundamentally structured by power relations” which are often not responsive to their needs.

As Pope Francis observes:

As long as the problems of the poor are not radically resolved ...by attacking the structural causes of inequality, no solution will be found for the world’s problems or, for that matter, to any problems. Inequality is the root of social ills. ... Doubly poor are those women who endure situations of exclusion, mistreatment, and violence, since they are frequently less able to defend their rights. Even so, we constantly witness among them impressive examples of daily heroism in defending and protecting their vulnerable families (EG 202 and 212).”



In her contribution to *Visions and Voices*, Thérèse M. Craine Bertsch offers an insight into both the struggles and the courage and commitment of single mothers.

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So interestingly, in that quotation Pope Francis recognizes and acknowledges the challenges facing mothers when they are socially marginalised and disadvantaged by structural inequalities.

Slide 14

MARTHA MAPASURE, “I MOURN MY FAITH”

“Young people face many difficulties and challenges in the Catholic Church, especially young females. There is nothing as depressing as becoming pregnant and not knowing what to do. Pregnant women need all the support of the priests, parish council and community, and mostly from the family. Yes, there are church rules and laws which have to be abided by, but as human beings we are prone to error; that does not mean we deserve to be ill-treated and judged. ... I would have loved my child to have had the pride and joy of being a Catholic, to share the rich experiences I have had of being Catholic. These, however, will remain wishes; I am an Anglican now and this is the faith my child will grow in. I will only have a history to tell my child, of how I was once a strong and proud Catholic and what made me leave, mourning all the practices of my faith.”



Elizabeth refers to the fact that “Single mothers often feel they do not belong in Zimbabwean parishes, since they do not fit into the youth groups or into the women’s groups. As a result, some leave the Church in search of more accepting communities where they will be respected.” Martha Mapasure is one such mother from South Africa. In a deeply distressing story, she tells of what happened when, as a devout young Catholic woman and youth leader, she fell pregnant. Her mother urged her to have an abortion to avoid causing scandal, but she refused. Eventually, she left the Catholic Church and joined an Anglican community where she feels more welcome but, she says, “I mourn my faith”:

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Martha's story reminds us how the narrative identities we form also influence the identities we offer to our children, and the stories we pass on to them.

Sometimes we can forget how recently women in countries like Britain were banished and even locked up in asylums for falling pregnant outside marriage. Often their children were forcibly removed from them at birth and given up for adoption. Many Irish writers and film makers have addressed these issues in various ways over the last few years. Martha's story reminds us that women are still punished and held responsible for pregnancies that may often have resulted from sexual violence or coercion, or simply from a moment of indiscretion or a desire that was difficult to control. The men are rarely held accountable.

Slide 15

URSULINE HIGH SCHOOL, "A LETTER TO POPE FRANCIS"

What is the Church doing to tackle the problem of men leaving their families? We know that you do speak about fathers in *Amoris Laetitia*, but we think the Church should focus much more on the responsibilities of fatherhood. One of our group described her experience and how it made her reflect on what it means to be a parent:

When I was 12 years old, my father left. It has taken these extreme circumstances for me to realise that "masculine genius" is also required in a family as well as "feminine genius." In an equal society, both parents ought to be equally responsible as parents for their children and equally engaged in activities outside parenthood like working, rather than women being restricted to a household environment. It is not right and just to say that only the mother has a responsibility and obligation to fulfil her duty as a parent and have motherhood as her only achievement. In Genesis 1:27, it says that "God created humankind in his own image"; I believe that this clearly refers to women and men. We are equals and consequently we should both have the whole life responsibility of parenting.



When we reflect on single mothers and various forms of family life it's important also to address the role of fathers in creating a family and raising children.

The Ursuline schoolgirls had strong things to say about the responsibilities of fathers and what they call "masculine genius":

*We believe using the phrase "feminine genius" puts a particular burden on women to be the "caring, nurturing" gender exclusively, yet there are no reasons why husbands and fathers cannot be these things also. ... What is the Church doing to tackle the problem of men leaving their families? We know that you do speak about fathers in *Amoris Laetitia*, but we think the Church should focus much more on the responsibilities of fatherhood. One of our group described her experience and how it made her reflect on what it means to be a parent:*

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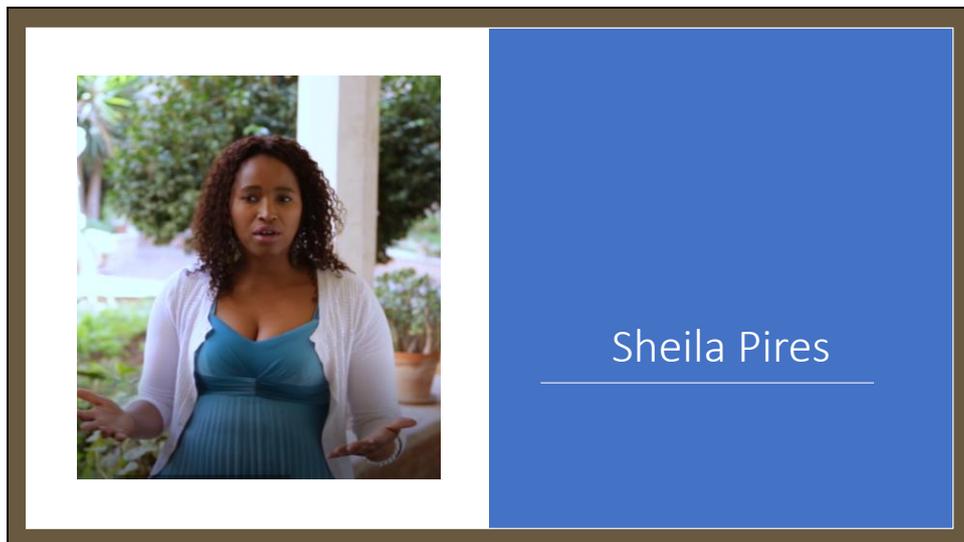
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Reflection on the role of father figures in our lives can be as challenging and difficult to fully understand as reflection on maternal influences.

What kind of associations and images does the paternal relationship suggest to you? How might this affect your understanding of and relationship to God the Father?

You might like to reflect on these questions before continuing.

Slide 16

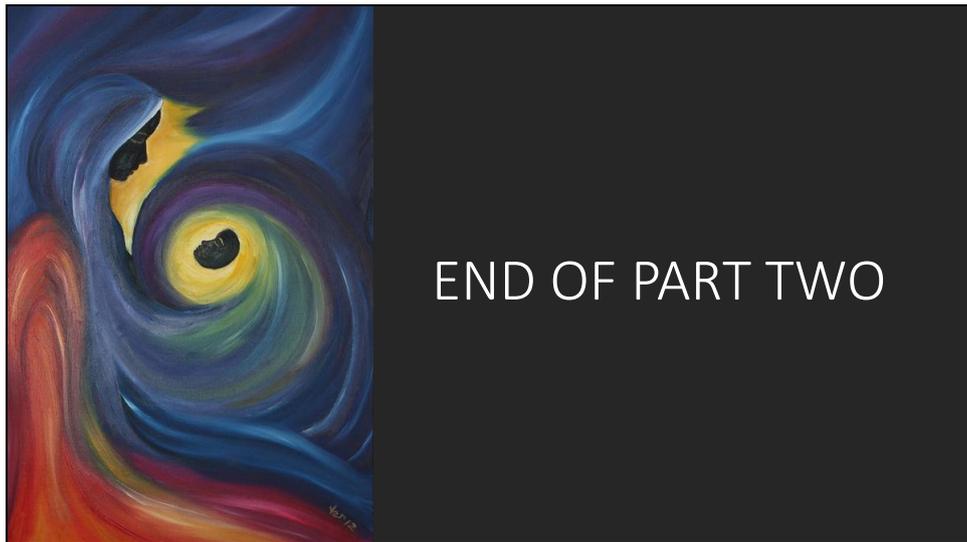


Sheila Pires is a radio presenter from Mozambique and South Africa who attended our symposium in Rome. I did an interview with her in which she speaks about her experience of being a divorcee bring up her son. She emphasises the importance of mothers raising their sons to respect the equality of women, and she describes the struggles she faces as a Catholic divorcee who experiences stigmatisation from others in the community.

You can watch Sheila’s interview by going to the Moodle site for this week and clicking on the link to the video there.

What does Sheila suggest about the responsibilities of mothers in educating their sons for family life and in the pursuit of more equal and mutual relationships between the sexes?

Slide 17



Feel free to pause again here if you want to explore these issues in more detail, and again, you might like to post to the discussion forum and make some notes in your journal.

Slide 18

WOMEN AS DAUGHTERS

“My mother became a model for my own spiritual journey, although it took me years to recognize it. She never stopped seeking, for she knew she was called “into his marvelous light” (Peter 1 2:9), despite intimations to the contrary from male clerics. When I feel spiritually homeless, thoughts of her console me and strengthen my resolve.”
(Jennifer Reek, “Standing on the Threshold”)

A circular logo in the bottom right corner of the slide, featuring a stylized tree or plant with a cross-like symbol above it, all enclosed within a circle.

When we talk about maternal identities, we also need to consider the relationships that we have to our own mothers, grandmothers, aunts and other mother figures. In other words, being a daughter is a significant though often complex aspect of being a woman. Some of the contributors to *Visions and Vocations* describe their relationships to their mothers in positive terms, even as they acknowledge that those relationships have sometimes involved struggles and misunderstandings. Here is how Jennifer Reek describes her mother’s influence on her life:

My mother became a model for my own spiritual journey, although it took me years to recognize it. She never stopped seeking, for she knew she was called “into his

marvelous light” (Peter 1 2:9), despite intimations to the contrary from male clerics. When I feel spiritually homeless, thoughts of her console me and strengthen my resolve. (Jennifer Reek, “Standing on the Threshold”)

That expression “spiritually homeless” is one that I know several others on this course share. You might like to read Jennifer’s essay and reflect on how it helps you to understand some of your own struggles and desire to feel a sense of belonging.

Slide 19

WOMEN AS DAUGHTERS

“Nervous and hesitant, I broke the news to my mother first. I knew she would always support me, no matter what. This time, however, I was wrong. The ‘sin’ I had committed was too grave. She was very disappointed and angry that I had brought shame, disgrace and embarrassment not only to the family but also to the whole Church.

She tried to persuade me to abort the pregnancy before everyone noticed, and most importantly to free our well-respected Catholic family from shame. I could not believe that my own Catholic mother was asking me to do this. ... No matter how much I begged my mother for forgiveness for my mistake, she refused to support me and constantly told me that it was not a mistake but a sin, and that I no longer deserved to be a Catholic. I lost my mother’s love, trust and support at a time when I needed her most. I began to mourn for my faith.” (Martha Mapasure, “I Mourn My Faith”)



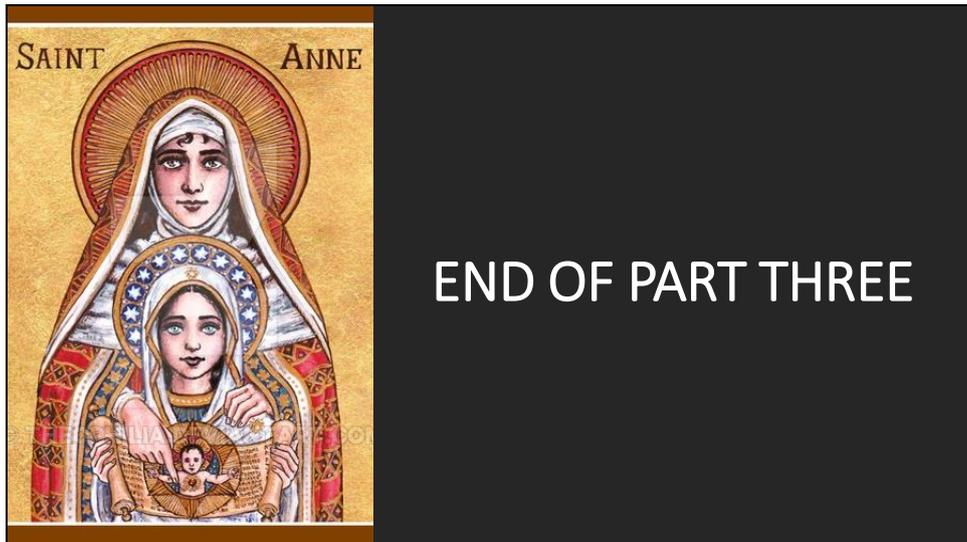
For many women, their relationships with their mothers are not sources of wisdom and healing but of anxiety, conflict and pain. It can be very difficult to navigate away from the maternal relationship into a sense of one’s own identity, particularly if that relationship is difficult with unresolved issues and resentments.

Some women in *Visions and Vocations* describe the struggles they have had with their mothers. We’ve already look at Martha Mapasure’s story. She describes a deep sense of betrayal and abandonment by her mother:

Nervous and hesitant, I broke the news to my mother first. I knew she would always support me, no matter what. This time, however, I was wrong. The “sin” I had committed was too grave. She was very disappointed and angry that I had brought shame, disgrace and embarrassment not only to the family but also to the whole Church.

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Slide 20



Reflections on our relationships with our mothers can create a deep sense of turbulence or loss. Please be gentle with yourself as you pause to reflect on this theme of mothers and daughters. In our reflections this week, we're going to consider Saint Anne, mother of the Virgin Mary and patron saint of grandmothers and of childless women. I leave you with this image for now, as you reflect and gather your thoughts. When you're ready, please come back to the final short section of this week's lecture.

Slide 21



MATERNAL LOSS

"No amount of support from family or friends was sufficient to help me heal from this trauma. I attended daily Mass and ranted and raved at God for taking my child. I recalled my Dad saying that God only lends us our children before he brings them home again. It took a year of counseling, lots of prayer and reaching out to help other AIDS patients and their families before I came to accept this loss and achieve healing.

My grief was compounded when then Cardinal Ratzinger stated that homosexuality was an intrinsic disorder. I found that such a destructive statement. My son was a very precious gift, created by God, in His image and likeness." (Julett Broadnax, "Losing Greg")



For our last section this week, I want us to consider sorrow and loss in maternal life. Losing a child is the deepest fear and greatest loss a mother can endure. It is woven into the story of the incarnation in the presence of Mary at the foot of the cross. This beautiful wooden head is from a sculpture of the Pieta by English sculptor Fenwick Lawson. You can read more about it in the reflection section for this week.

In *Visions and Vocations*, Julett Broadnax's short reflection on the death of her son Greg from AIDS is a powerful and eloquent maternal lament:

No amount of support from family or friends was sufficient to help me heal from this trauma. I attended daily Mass and ranted and raved at God for taking my child. I recalled my Dad saying that God only lends us our children before he brings them home again. It took a year of counseling, lots of prayer and reaching out to help other AIDS patients and their families before I came to accept this loss and achieve healing.

My grief was compounded when then Cardinal Ratzinger stated that homosexuality was an intrinsic disorder. I found that such a destructive statement. My son was a very precious gift, created by God, in His image and likeness. (Julett Broadnax, "Losing Greg")

You might also like to read the essay by Sophie Staines and Deborah Woodman on the premature birth and death of their twins: "Living under the radar – or celebrating family in all its forms?" You can find the link in the Moodle site. If you read their essay, you might like to know that they are now the parents of a lovely little three year old girl, Merryn.

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We have not in this session gone into complex questions to do with contraception, abortion and maternal mortality. There are several readings in both books that address these issues. You may want to raise questions relating to these in the discussion forum, but it would make this session too long if we explored these difficult issues here. Next year, we offer a course on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights, which is also taught by me and which will explore these issues in some detail.

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That's all for now. Once again, if you want to do some reflection on this week's themes, I've uploaded some materials to Moodle. This week, I offer two different reflections – one on Saint Anne, and one on the Pieta.