

Standing up for motherhood

It was Mother's Day. A parishioner had been invited to speak at the end of Mass about the meaning of motherhood, which she did with great passion and drawing from the depths of her experience as a mother and grandmother. I sat and listened, revelling in this witness of love, fidelity, commitment and joy.

As she spoke, I was deeply aware of my own gift of motherhood. Not a biological motherhood (at forty, I have never conceived or given birth to a child), but a spiritual maternity which has matured over the years through all the equivalent agonies and ecstasies to those portrayed by the speaker. I thought of all those dreams for the Church I wanted to realise for the sake of the next generation of believers; all those projects I had created, birthed and nurtured in the hope of inspiring faith; all those gospel lifestyle decisions made in the hope of modelling fidelity to the young. Not least, I thought of my beautiful nieces and nephews and godchildren: the love I feel for them, the sense that, if necessary, I would die for them.

All these thoughts were swirling through my head as the speaker returned to her seat and the priest invited all the mothers in the congregation to stand for a special blessing. Instinctively I stood up! Was it because I was so caught up in thoughts about my own vocation? Or was it a pragmatic reaching for grace?

After all, if I didn't seize this opportunity to be blessed in my maternal gift, when would such a blessing ever come my way? Most parishes are not in the habit of blessing their childless women in the gift of their spiritual motherhood.

Anyway, as I stood there, the ramifications of my action sinking in, I felt the prickle of discomfort (What will people think?). Followed by a chuckle of amusement (This could get a few tongues wagging!) Followed by a sense of empowerment. For the first time in my life I had stood before the church and declared my maternal gift.

And why shouldn't I? After all, my Catholic faith tradition speaks eloquently about the connection between motherhood and celibacy; the channelling of one's sexual and creative energies in a profound 'yes' to God; the gift of womanhood which reveals the face of God, which gives birth to a renewed church and nourishes people in their journey of faith. The church offers a powerful symbol of all this in Mary, virgin-mother of God. But this ecclesial symbol is not just decoration; it must find real connections with contemporary women of faith.

How simple it would be for parishes to invite all mothers, whether or not they had physically borne children, to stand for a blessing on Mother's Day, and to proclaim both the physical and the spiritual reality of maternal energy in the church. Not only does this affirm the contribution of childless women, it

also affirms the fact that women who are biologically mothers have a profound spiritual dimension to their vocation. Also, it reverences the whole adult life of a woman, not just that part of her life in which children were raised. And it offers a more complete vocational role modeling for our young who listen and learn from what we say and do.

But to get back to that Mother's Day Mass. I'm glad I stood for a blessing. I will every year for now on. And I would encourage all childless women of faith who have given life to the world through the fruits of their labour and love, to grasp such opportunities: stand and be blessed as a mother in faith.

Finally, there is an obvious parallel here for all those childless men who have gifted the church with their spiritual paternity. It is not uncommon for Catholics to acknowledge the spiritual fatherhood of priests on Father's Day; why not also those faithful lay men who do not have children? Come Father's Day, stand and be blessed. •

