A Theology of Motherhood

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For my children,
Cyrus, Ann, Eliza, Beatrix & Ignatius,
and for all mothers everywhere.

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Chapter 1: Anticipation

Introduction

Before a woman becomes a mother, there is, ideally, a time of anticipation. For some women, this time begins when they are girls, as they think ahead to the possibility of having their own children someday. For others, it comes during courtship or even after marriage. It may also arrive near the end of the childbearing decades and be fraught with concern over one's chances of becoming a mother. Whenever and however this time of anticipation comes, it is a period of limbo, in which a girl or woman who later becomes a mother knows that she wants to be a mother. In some sense, this is where motherhood begins: in the sheer contemplation of it. This project, then, begins as motherhood often does—with *anticipation.* This introductory chapter, like a woman preparing for motherhood, anticipates and previsages what is to come. It also provides the starting point for the mature fruit of this labor: a theology of motherhood.

I began a round of my own maternal anticipation in 2008 while nearing completion of my master's degree in religious studies at the University of Virginia. I already had two children—an eight-year-old son and a five-year-old daughter—and, after careful consideration and prayer, my husband and I decided to try to have a third, and probably final, child. To our considerable surprise, I became pregnant with not one, not two, but three children: *triplets*. After overcoming the initial shock, I felt drawn to know more about the theological understanding of motherhood in my own tradition, the same tradition that I study—Orthodox Christianity. I was aware of many feasts and icons of motherhood in Orthodoxy, and I felt confident that with a bit of research I could find just the right treatise to scratch my personal itch for theological thought on motherhood.

I did find ample theological source material on motherhood—specifically, the icons and feasts that had come to mind, as well as scripture, homilies, and rites relating to motherhood. But I found no written theological meditations on motherhood within Orthodoxy Christianity. This

absence was understandable in some sense, because family has been in tension with celibacy for much of Christian history and little Orthodox theological writing has been dedicated to women's—much less mothers'—reflections and experiences. Even so, I was disappointed, because motherhood is central both to lived Christian experience and to Christian theology in the figure of Mary, the Mother of God, as she is often called in Orthodoxy. Surely, throughout the centuries, there has been untold theological *thought* about motherhood by Orthodox mothers, as well as theological *conversation* about motherhood among Orthodox women and men, but one finds only scant written evidence of such musings.

Even though it was difficult to find what I was looking for in my own tradition, I noticed that motherhood does serve as a focal point in other areas of contemporary American discourse. Indeed, themes of motherhood are often part of the cultural conversation, as evidenced by a controversial 2012 *Time* magazine cover photo of a mother breastfeeding a three-year-old.[1] Examinations of motherhood in this arena are mostly economic, political, and sociological—and often polemical—rather than theological. Some feminist thinkers, for example, have taken up the topic of motherhood, but their work does not tend to be theological in nature. Conversely, some theological thinkers have investigated topics related to motherhood, such as maternal imagery for God, but they have not addressed motherhood itself. A few have speculated about a theology of family and marriage in a Christian context, but, again, they have not focused on motherhood. These perspectives on family and motherhood are important and valid, but they do not offer the theology of motherhood for which I was looking, and they do not speak directly to a vision of motherhood within Orthodox Christianity.

This paradox—the lack of Orthodox Christian *theological reflection* on motherhood alongside the rich Orthodox Christian *sources* on motherhood—prompted me to turn what had

[1] *Time* magazine, May 21, 2012.

started as a personal quest into a professional project. I want to resolve this paradox not only for myself but also for others. As I speak to women, and to men, about this project, they repeatedly affirm my intuition that this quest needs to be pursued. Orthodox women want more information about the theological meaning of motherhood. The Orthodox Church itself will also be enriched by theological reflection on motherhood that offers a new look at this integral part of Christian existence, particularly as it concerns Orthodox understandings of the human body and of human kinship. Therefore, a theology of motherhood is needed not only for mothers but also for the wider Orthodox Church.

Motherhood is an as-yet unused but potentially invaluable lens for viewing Orthodox Christian theology. After all, even the most ascetic of saints was not born in a monastery. Moreover, Christ himself singularly sanctified motherhood by choosing to have a mother, and for countless generations Orthodox mothers have shaped the spirituality of their families. On these grounds, it is dismaying that a cohesive theology of motherhood has yet to be formed, and it is unthinkable that more time might pass without dedicated exploration of motherhood. Fortunately, though the grounds for an Orthodox theoretical exploration of motherhood are untilled, they are also fertile. What follows is a first attempt to work the soil of motherhood in Orthodox theology.

Crafting a Theology of Motherhood

I now elaborate both on the current state of theological reflection about motherhood and on possibilities and methods for moving forward. First, I address more deeply the reasons for the current lack of theological reflection on motherhood, both inside and outside of Orthodoxy. I then discuss possibilities for a theology of motherhood within Orthodoxy and outline more thoroughly both why such a theology is needed and why this era of Christianity is ripe for the effort. Next, I provide a discussion of methodology and nomenclature, which is followed by an outline of the

normative understanding of motherhood in the contemporary Orthodox Church. I conclude with a preview of the remaining chapters.

Lack of Theological Reflection on Motherhood

Whenever one encounters a lacuna such as the one described here, it is sensible to ask why it exists. In this case—the lack of sustained reflection on motherhood in Orthodox Christianity—there is no shortage of possibilities. For one, until very recently, the theological landscape in Christianity has been entirely dominated by men. I have joked that I went "searching for mothers in the fathers"—the patristic thinkers of the early Christian church—and came up dry (aside from a few tidbits here and there and a few homilies from Saint John Chrysostom,[2] that I examine in chapter 2). In all seriousness, however, why would the Church fathers, or any of their more recent male inheritors, address motherhood? Most of these men lived celibate lives, and many of them did so within monasteries or hermitages and had little or no contact with women, much less with mothers (excepting, of course, their own). Some even devalued motherhood—for example, Saint Jerome, who praised fifth-century Saint Paula for sailing away to become a nun while her abandoned young son cried on the shore.[3] Of course, the patristic thinkers did take an interest in one particular mother: Mary, the Mother of God, though they focused most often not on her motherhood but instead on her virginity, which accorded better with the Christian way of life that they typically valued. Though I may be disappointed in these theologians for not approaching the visceral, very real motherhood that the Mother of God experienced in addition to her virginity, I can also see why it was not a high-priority topic for them.

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[2] I typically include the religious designation (e.g., Saint, Father, Bishop) for a referenced figure on the first mention in each chapter, then drop that title in future references.

[3] Jerome, "Letter 108," trans. W.H. Fremantle, G. Lewis and W.G. Martley in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, vol. 6. ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1893) rev. and ed. for New Advent by Kevin Knight, 2009, http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/3001108.htm.

The historical dominance of the male perspective in Orthodoxy extends beyond the monastics. Indeed, men have accounted for the vast majority of lay theologians and married clergy theologians, as well as iconographers and hymnographers. Even so, I do not conclude that all theology generated by male theologians is "gendered" in the sense of addressing only half of the human experience. Instead, I understand almost all of Orthodox theology to be concerned with the *human* condition, including that of both women and men. Still, Orthodox theology has mostly been done *by* men, which in practice has meant that very little attention has been given to women's experiences, including motherhood.

Because only men are priests in Orthodoxy, and because nearly all theological training has been reserved for male monastics and priests, women have rarely had the opportunity to receive theological training. There has never been a ban on women theologians or on the teaching of theology to females, but the effect has been much the same. Comparatively little written theological reflection of any type has been generated by women in the two-thousand-year history of Orthodox Christianity. This observation is not meant to dismiss the incessant theological thinking done by women and mothers throughout Christian history, or their roles in the theological education of their children and families, including their sons, husbands, and brothers who became theologians. It is, however, meant to note that women have seldom participated in more formal theological discussions of theology in the Orthodox world and have seldom contributed to the written record of theological reflection.[4]

[4] There are exceptions, but they seem to appear mostly in the Christian West—for example, Margery Kempe, Julian of Norwich, and Elisabeth Leseur, to name a few. Despite the dozens of female Orthodox theologians who are working today or who worked in the recent past, one is hard pressed to find any women doing so prior to the last half-century. One does find scholars, such as Saint Catherine of the fourth century; travelogue writers and proto-anthropologists, such as Egeria, also of the fourth century; and icon defenders, such as Empress Theodora of the ninth century. All of these women contributed significantly to Orthodox tradition and theology in their own ways, but none was a theologian per se.

Although not taken up within Orthodoxy, the topic of motherhood has been taken up by feminist thinkers—some outside of Christianity and all outside of Orthodoxy. I briefly review here the work of some of these thinkers whom I consider to be representative of this body of thought, then comment on how I perceive their work to relate to my current project. This review is brief because, as I explicate here and elsewhere, while I respect this body of work and find it to be meaningful, I do not view it as directly beneficial to my quest for a theology of motherhood in the Orthodox Church.

For example, the contemporary Belgian philosopher Luce Irigaray has much to contribute to a philosophical discussion of motherhood. She strongly holds the position that women have been defined almost exclusively by their role as mothers, and she encourages women and men to examine this narrow construction of women and to release themselves from it.[5] I share some of Irigaray's concerns about the perils of conflating womanhood and motherhood (though my concerns ring in a theological key), and, though I do not engage with her work directly in this project, her ideas on the topic are certainly in the air that I breathe. I return, later in this chapter and in chapter 2, to the potential for conflation of womanhood and motherhood in Orthodoxy.

The recent feminist philosopher Sara Ruddick also takes up motherhood, but she focuses on its care aspect rather than its biological and physical experience, and she asserts that this sort of motherhood can be enacted by a female or a male.[6] Though I am sympathetic to her message that promoting an ethic of motherhood might have positive political consequences, my work is primarily theological rather than political, and I define motherhood as an office performed by females, as I explicate in my discussion of normative motherhood within Orthodoxy below.

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[5] See especially Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985); *The Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter and Carolyn Burke (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985).

[6] See Sara Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking: Toward A Politics of Peace* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1995).

The recent feminist theologian and philosopher Grace Jantzen is concerned with what she understands to be "natality"—specifically, with the fact that all humans are born and with the untold implications of this fact.[7] I find her thinking and her push to centralize natality compelling, but her work addresses the philosophy of religion, rather than theology, and she does not explore motherhood. Elizabeth Johnson, a contemporary Catholic theologian, in her work on Mariology, advocates for an understanding of Mary as a figure who can be encountered as a sister, an effort to which I am sympathetic but which does not bear directly on this project.[8]

The contemporary Swedish Lutheran feminist Cristina Grenholm takes the most theological approach among these scholars in her appraisal of motherhood. She argues that motherhood has been subjugated in Christian theology, and she wants to bring it to light for examination. She, like Irigaray, wants to hold motherhood in high esteem without making it a prerequisite for womanhood. I concur with her when she writes, "To make motherhood the object of critical analysis is to challenge tradition and to offer renewal and change."[9] This statement aligns well with the goals of my project, but Grenholm's efforts toward analysis and change are philosophical and do not directly engage with Christian theological sources on motherhood, as I wish to do.

Thus, though each of these scholars works with motherhood in a particular way, none encounters what I wish to encounter in this project: the theological concerns of motherhood. One notable exception to this pattern is the fourteenth-century Catholic mystic, Julian of Norwich. As noted by Julian scholar Veronica Mary Rolf, Julian's contributions to a theology of motherhood include "defin[ing] Jesus Christ as being *truly* our Mother, as fully as God is our Father; . . .

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[7] See Grace Jantzen, *Becoming Divine: Towards a Feminist Philosophy of Religion* (Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999).

[8] See Elizabeth Johnson, *Truly Our Sister: A Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints*, (New York, NY: Continuum International publishing Group Inc., 2003).

[9] Cristina Grenholm, *Motherhood and Love: Beyond the Gendered Stereotypes of Theology*, trans. Marie Tåqvist (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011), 58.

mak[ing] God's Motherhood an indispensable cornerstone of her Trinitarian theology; and . . . convey[ing] this theology directly to uneducated *evencristians* [her fellow Christians] in the vernacular."[10] Julian's revelations about God's motherhood appear to stem both from the awareness that Jesus Christ created in a maternal fashion—he gave birth to all of Creation—and from Julian's conviction that God in trinity is constantly creative. Julian's theology of God as mother is especially bold in that it was not a metaphor; as Rolf notes, "to her way of thinking, there is absolutely no reason why God is not *equally* Father and Mother."[11] Julian's revelations about God as mother have a great deal to offer to a Christian theology of motherhood—perhaps especially the three qualities she assigns to motherhood (love, wisdom, and knowing)—and are characterized by much compatibility with Orthodox theology. In this project, however, I am focused on Orthodox Christian sources (an approach for which I offer a rationale a bit later).[12]

Another interlocutor whose work on motherhood inspires me is Tikva Frymer-Kensky, a scholar in Assyriology, Sumerology, and contemporary Jewish studies. Her book *Motherprayer: The Pregnant Woman's Spiritual Companion*[13] examines motherhood through a theological lens influenced by ancient cultures and texts, her own Judaism, and her feminist sensibilities. I share with her the wish to work firmly within my tradition while doing a theological examination of motherhood and living my own motherhood—in her words: "I do not want to spend Sabbath at synagogue and give birth in a coven."[14] I admire Frymer-Kensky's efforts to work within her own tradition, and I periodically return to her thoughts about motherhood.

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[10] Veronica Mary Rolf, *Julian's Gospel: Illuminating the Life and Revelations of Julian of Norwich* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2013), 514.
[11] Ibid., 516.
[12] Comparing Julian's revelations with the sophiological work of the nineteenth-century Russian religious theologians would make for a wonderful project outside the purview of this one.
[13] Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *Motherprayer* (New York, NY: Riverhead Books, 1995). I will always be grateful to Professors Vanessa and Peter Ochs, who introduced me to this book.
[14] Ibid., xvii.

I have been necessarily cursory in reviewing these thinkers because my project is pointedly focused on an Orthodox Christian understanding of motherhood.[15] Therefore, while these thinkers contribute much to the larger philosophical and theological conversation about motherhood and I wish to add my own Orthodox voice to that conversation, still the works just reviewed here have little to offer an internal examination of Orthodox Christian thought on motherhood. [16] One reason that these other philosophical and theological projects diverge from the quest for an Orthodox theology of motherhood lies in the fact that Orthodox source material on women and mothers differs considerably from the source material found in other Christian traditions (as becomes apparent a bit later in this chapter in the discussion of Saint Mary of Bethany). Still, I wish to join the chorus of women who write and think about motherhood, from whatever background and whatever field. I also acknowledge that my sensibilities are undoubtedly and unashamedly influenced by feminism; I grew up in a house adorned with original posters from the early-twentieth-century women's suffrage movement, handed down through four generations of women in my family. I embrace this inheritance, which is both familial and cultural, and it shapes my thinking, my inclinations, and my theological understanding of women and men in the Orthodox Church.

In addition to the previously reviewed scholarship about motherhood, there is a stirring in the Christian theological world to examine matters of theology and family. For example, Pope John Paul II contributed substantial thoughts about family in *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology*

[15] Other feminist thinkers who have taken up the topic of motherhood but whose work does not tend to be theological in nature include Maura Ryan, Julia Hanigsberg, Eva Feder Kittay, Simone de Beauvoir, and Hélène Cixous. Conversely, here are some theological thinkers who have investigated maternal imagery and language for God but have not addressed a theology of motherhood itself: Sally McFague, Elizabeth Johnson, Catherine Keller, and the Orthodox theologian Paul Evdokimov.

[16] A wonderful possibility for a completely different project would be an Orthodox Christian response to—and engagement with—feminist thinkers who write on various aspects of motherhood. Orthodox thinker Deborah Belonick has written a small response to feminism from an Orthodox perspective, but it deals in generalities, not with specific thinkers. See Deborah Belonick, *Feminism in Christianity: An Orthodox Christian Response*, 2nd ed. (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2012).

of the Body, which in turn prompted many responses both within and outside of the Catholic world.[17] This work continues now with Pope Francis, who on several occasions has called for a "theology of women."[18] Within Orthodoxy in particular, several books on marriage and sexuality have appeared in the past few decades, including *Marriage: An Orthodox Perspective*, by Father John Meyendorff; *Love, Marriage, and Family in the Eastern Orthodox Tradition,* compiled by the Sophia Institute; *The Sacrament of Love*, by Paul Evdokimov; *Love, Sexuality, and the Sacrament of Marriage*, by Archdeacon John Chryssavgis; and *Incarnate Love: Essays in Orthodox Ethics*, by Vigen Guroian. Rich as these works are, however, none of them examines motherhood, and, probably not coincidentally, none was written by a woman. There is one essay—"On the Imitation of the Mother of God," by nun, mother, and recently sainted Orthodox woman Maria Skobtsova—that provides a rich reflection on ways in which all humans, including mothers in their motherhood, can imitate Mary's sharing in her son's passion. This essay is dear to me, because it is the one I know of by an Orthodox woman on motherhood, but its focus on the cross does not lend itself to my study.[19]

It is worth noting that there is one venue in which many Christian mothers, including Orthodox mothers, are reflecting theologically about motherhood: the internet. Whether on "mommy blogs" or in articles written for online magazines, there is a significant amount of attention being given to the theological meaning of motherhood. As I noted above, women have surely been thinking and speaking theologically about motherhood for millennia, but very few of their reflections have been written down. The internet is changing this, as it now offers an easily accessed platform for such writing. Although I think this is a wonderful development, and that

[17] See John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body*, trans. Michael Waldstein (Boston, MA: Pauline Books and Press, 2006).
[18] Maureen Fiedler, "Pope Francis on Women in His Interview With 'America' Magazine," *National Catholic Reporter*, September 19, 2013, http://ncronline.org/blogs/francis-chronicles/pope-francis-women-his-interview-america-magazine.
[19] Maria Skobtsova, "On the Imitation of the Mother of God," in *Mother Maria Skobtsova: Essential Writings,* trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2003), 61–74. Maria became a nun after her one child grew into adulthood.

these words of women about their mothering are rich and important, I did not find the sort of sustained theological work with motherhood within Orthodoxy that I was looking for in these sources.

Overall, then, rich theological reflection on motherhood is not present, neither in the ancient past of Orthodoxy, nor in more contemporary and more philosophical discussions of family, nor online. At the same time, there are many reasons that an Orthodox Christian theology of motherhood can and should be formed.

Possibilities for a Theology of Motherhood in Orthodoxy

Though there is scant theological reflection on motherhood from the past, the present offers hope for a theology of motherhood in the Orthodox Church. To elucidate the promise of the current age, I now look to the situation of women theologians in the Orthodox Church today, as well as the ample source material on motherhood within Orthodoxy. I review the contemporary narratives of motherhood that make the case for a theology of motherhood compelling, and I note the need for a theology of motherhood within Orthodoxy.

Women in Orthodox Theology and the Orthodox Church Today

The roles and functions of women in the Orthodox Church are expanding and changing; as part of this shift, the historical dearth of female theologians in the Church is being left in the past. Several Orthodox seminaries now accept women into their theological programs,[20] and a few secular institutions have added Orthodox topics to their offerings, thus allowing women (and men) to obtain higher degrees in, or relating to, Orthodox theology. I am one beneficiary of this second

[20] Examples include Holy Cross Orthodox Seminary of Boston and Saint Vladimir's Theological Seminary of Crestwood, New York.

development.[21] In addition, several Orthodox women are teaching Orthodox theology in higher education. Only now, as a result of these developments, is there anything approaching a critical mass of women doing Orthodox theology in service to the church or in dialogue with the broader culture.

In the Orthodox Church itself, Orthodox women now occupy an array of leadership positions, including seats on parish councils and boards and administrations of Orthodox nonprofits. In addition, the contemporary Orthodox female laity (like the male laity) appears to be more theologically inclined than previous generations, as indicated by the array of "adult formation" offerings at churches and the blossoming of Orthodox theological works aimed at nonscholars. Moreover, women are more involved than ever in the liturgical life of the Church; for example, in many Orthodox churches in the United States, women now serve as readers (an order that reads scripture in the liturgy), an occurrence that was uncommon just thirty years ago.[22] A vibrant effort is underway to restore the ancient and theologically valid office of the female diaconate, which would, among other things, allow female deaconesses to minister to sick persons, assist with baptisms and other liturgical functions, and minister to women who are imprisoned or homebound.[23]

In the midst of these changes and efforts toward change, Orthodox women—including mothers—are more present in Church leadership positions and more theologically sophisticated than ever before. In turn, whereas the Church fathers were not predisposed to address Christian motherhood, there is now, for the first time in history, a crop of thinkers who are likely to be

[21] Although the University of Virginia does not have an Orthodox Christianity studies program, I have had the good fortune of studying Orthodox theology here in Religious Studies with Professor Vigen Guroian. Notable, non-smeinary programs in Orthodox studies are offered by Fordham University and the University of Cambridge.

[22] Often, women serving as readers are given a blessing by their parish priest for this task, but not ordained by their bishop. In contrast, male readers are sometimes blessed to read, but appear to be more often ordained for the task. This is an important topic for another day.

[23] For conferences, articles, and events relating to this effort, see the website of the St. Phoebe Center for the History of the Deaconess: http://orthodoxdeaconess.org.

particularly interested in Orthodox Christian motherhood: Orthodox Christian women scholars, students, and erudite nonscholars. One important caveat: these women are not limited by their femaleness to topics of family and motherhood; rather, they are, of course, free to pursue any theological topic. My point is simply that, for the first time, there is a group of educated Orthodox people who are likely to concertedly turn to the topic of motherhood.

Ample Orthodox Source Material on Motherhood

In addition to the social and cultural changes within the Orthodox Church that are opening up avenues of interest and possibility for women, there is ample Orthodox Christian source material on women and motherhood, though admittedly it is not accompanied by sustained theological reflection. Some other Christian circles have seen efforts to historically relocate or interpretively reconstitute such source material addressing women. For instance, Catholic theologian Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza explains the need to reconstitute women from scripture by lamenting her tradition's loss of the story of the woman who anoints Jesus Christ in all four Gospels[24] (Matt.26:6–13, Mark 14:3–9, Luke 7:36–50, and John 12:1–8), as well as the woman who anoints Christ. Schüssler Fiorenza writes that in contrast to Jesus Christ's statement that "wherever the gospel is preached in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her (Mark 14:9 NIV)," in fact, "the woman's prophetic sign-action did not become a part of the gospel knowledge of Christians. Even her name is lost to us. . . . [Instead,] another story is told: the story of the apostle

[24] Schüssler Fiorenza laments that she is called Mary of Bethany in *John* but does not own this name in the parallel tales in the three other Gospels. This characterization is fair in light of the exegetical puzzle of this figure, but it stands in contrast to the Orthodox treatment of Mary of Bethany, which consistently gives her this name and thereby *personalizes* her, thus opening the way to use icons of her and hold feasts in her honor. This comparison further underscores the gulf between Schüssler Fiorenza's situation and the Orthodox situation (a point I make in the next paragraph).

who betrayed Jesus. The name of the betrayer is remembered, but the name of the faithful disciple is forgotten because she was a woman."[25]

In the Orthodox Church, however, Mary of Bethany is not lost; to the contrary, she remains part of the "gospel knowledge." She is understood to be the Mary who is the sister of Martha and Lazarus, known well from Luke 10:38–42, and one of the myrrh-bearing women—Jesus Christ's first followers to encounter his risen self (Matt. 27:55–61, 28:1–10; Mark 15:40–16:11; Luke 23:50–24:10; John 19:38–20:18). Moreover, Mary of Bethany has two feast days in the Orthodox Church: June 4 and the third Sunday following Pascha (Orthodox Easter), the Sunday of the Myrrh-Bearing Women. She is also the subject of many homilies and hymns; as her and her sister's festal hymn states, "You fervently believed in Christ and His marvelous acts, O Martha and Mary, sisters of Lazarus. You were adorned with radiant virtues and were found worthy to be numbered with the saints; together with holy Lazarus pray to God for us."[26] Indeed, I grew up in a church that featured an icon of Mary of Bethany on the wall near where my family usually stood.

I relate these details about Mary of Bethany to illustrate the fact that Orthodoxy does not require a "reconstitution," in Schüssler Fiorenza's term, in order to get at a theology of women or—specific to my project—a theology of motherhood. To the contrary, Orthodox Christian sources on motherhood are readily available. They do, however, need *attention*, and this is one area of commonality with Schüssler Fiorenza's point about Judas in comparison with Mary of Bethany: Orthodoxy might sometimes also remember Judas more vividly than Mary of Bethany, which is a problem of attention. The correction for this lapse does not, however, require recovery of things that have been lost. Instead, it requires a fresh gaze and a willingness to raise certain concerns to a

[25] Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, Tenth Anniversary Edition (New York, NY: Crossroad, 1995), xliii.
[26] "Troparion of Mary and Martha," Orthodox Wiki, October 25, 2012, http://orthodoxwiki.org/Mary_of_Bethany.

new level of examination and even veneration. These readily available sources pertaining to motherhood in Orthodoxy are the heart of this project.

Competing Narratives

Another reason for this project—theological reflection on motherhood—is the competition. Many narratives about motherhood are circulating today—political, consumerist, social, and so on. As a result, a mother can easily overwhelm herself in the parenting section of a bookstore simply by attempting to discern the tribe of mothering to which she subscribes. Orthodox Christian mothers—and Christian mothers of any stripe, or mothers who are not Christian but spiritually inclined—need a competing narrative for motherhood, one that gets at questions deeper and more meaningful than "cloth or disposable."

Need for a Theology of Motherhood in Orthodoxy

At some point in my review of the Orthodox sources on motherhood, I realized that theological reflection on motherhood is needed not only by individual Orthodox persons but also by the Orthodox Church. The Church needs the fresh perspective that comes from examining its traditional sources—icons, hymns, rites, homilies, and so on—through a new theological lens: that of motherhood. This theological lens may also be needed by the greater Christian church beyond Orthodoxy, but here I speak to my own tradition.

The Orthodox Church needs a theology of motherhood for three primary reasons. One, as noted here, the current era is the first time in which women are contributing en masse (though perhaps this is too strong a term) to the Orthodox theological scene. This shift constitutes an important moment in history. The Church that declared in the fourth century, in the words of venerable patristic theologian Saint Basil, that the natures of men and women are "alike of equal

honor, the virtues . . . equal, the struggle equal, the judgment alike,"[27] has much to gain by pausing and listening to its women's theological voices as they emerge clearly in the coming century, especially on the underrepresented topics of women's bodies and experiences.

I expound upon the second and third reasons that the Orthodox Church needs a theology of motherhood a bit later in the chapter (in the presentation of this dissertation's central theses); in the meantime, I offer them here in brief. I found in my study of Orthodox sources on motherhood a real and unmistakable appreciation for the maternal body—an appreciation of the physical body that is rightly intertwined with the spiritual one. As twentieth-century Orthodox theologian Serge Verkhovskoy observes, "The task of motherhood—the creation of a new man [sic], a new Christian—is obviously an exploit in which the physical and spiritual elements are inseparable."[28] Therefore, an intimate examination of the human form—physical and spiritual together—is constantly needed within Orthodoxy, and, as I show, doing so through the lens of motherhood promotes an understanding of the body that is freshly in line with Orthodoxy's own incarnational theology. Finally, I also noticed in my sources a real appreciation for the intimate and holy connection between mother and child, and between mother and God. Because of the insight they offer into kinship—both human and divine—these relationships can be held up as an example for all Orthodox Christians; their ideal is not reserved for the contemplation of mothers alone, and they have something powerful to offer to a consideration of Christian kinship.

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[27] Basil of Caesarea, *On the Human Condition,* trans. Nonna Verna Harrison (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2005), 45.

[28] Serge Verkhovskoy, "Creation of Man and the Establishment of the Family in Light of the Book of Genesis," *St. Vladimir's Seminary Quarterly* 8 (1964): 5–30. I insert "[sic]" here to acknowledge that the masculine noun "man" sounds especially off here, given that Verkhovskoy is referring to the creation of a new *human*, not specifically a male one. The use of "man" to denote humanity, both female and male, is fairly common in Orthodoxy theology, and sometimes even found in liturgical translations. This use is found in other interlocutors of mine, but I choose only rarely draw attention to it.

Methods for this Theology of Motherhood

I now elucidate a number of methodological aspects of this project: my choice of nomenclature, general methods of Orthodox theology, my decision to work with sources from within Orthodoxy, the challenge of any examination of motherhood, and my reliance on prayer.

Nomenclature

In this project, the term *motherhood* refers to a woman's act of creating and caring for a child or children. The term *creating* here refers to biological motherhood, but it is not strictly limited to biological motherhood; it can also involve the creation of the space—both literal and figurative—to adopt a child or to foster a child in any context. Similarly, the phrase *caring for* refers not only to the many physical acts of caregiving, such as feeding and bathing; it also includes giving maternal love and attention to the child. Nor is motherhood limited here to the child's early years, in which she or he is technically dependent on the mother. Rather, it encompasses the woman's whole life of mothering, whatever that may be, and it extends beyond the grave through the ways in which the living and the dead are connected in Orthodox sacraments.

I have also given careful thought to the nomenclature used in this project for Jesus Christ's mother. The figure of Mary has been given many epithets in the Orthodox world but is most often referred to in English as the "Mother of God," which is a rough translation of the ancient Greek coinage *Theotokos*. Church historian Jaroslav Pelikan asserts that a more accurate translation of *Theotokos* into English is "the one who gives birth to the one who is God."[29] Indeed, Mary's visceral birthgiving of Jesus Christ carries powerful significance for a theology of motherhood, as encountered in chapter 4, and this visceral aspect is connoted less effectively by the phrase "Mother of God." Therefore, for the sake of both accuracy and aptness to this project, I borrow from Pelikan

[29] Jaroslav Pelikan, *Mary Through the Centuries* (New Haven, CT: Yale, 1996), 55.

and refer to Mary most often with the more mellifluous but no less accurate term "Birthgiver of God," or simply "Birthgiver."

I make this decision with awareness of two risks. First, I might seem to be arguing against my first point about nomenclature—that motherhood is not limited to biology—when I refer to the mother of Jesus Christ by her biological act of childbirth. Second, by referring to Mary by any title, rather than by her given name, I might distance myself and my readers from her. These are undesirable results indeed, but I am willing to take these risks because of the crucial weight that the title "Birthgiver" gives to the authentically human and embodied motherhood that Mary experienced. Mary's act of giving birth, which is appropriately emphasized in the honorific "Birthgiver," is important for all mothering and all mothers—not just those who have physically given birth, and not just at the point in time at which they first give birth, but rather for the life of their mothering.

The other phrase I wish to clarify is "theology of motherhood." The term *theology* might be defined simply as "the study of God" or "the study of things divine." In turn, a "theology of liturgy," or, as it is more commonly termed, "liturgical theology," is the study of things divine as they have to do with worship through liturgies or rites. I use the phrase "theology of motherhood" in much the same way—to refer to the study of things divine that have to do with motherhood. I tend to describe my own project as *a* theology of motherhood because I profess no monopoly on the topic. My own work is one study of the divine as it has to do with motherhood, and other such studies can certainly be made; indeed, I hope they are already emerging from other thinkers, both Orthodox and otherwise.

Methods of Orthodox Theology

When I explain my dissertation topic to a non-Orthodox person, I am often asked, "Are you working within the Greek Orthodox tradition? The Russian?" I grew up as a Belarusian descendent in a Carpatho-Russian Orthodox Church, and I have spent the majority of my adult life so far in a Ukrainian Orthodox Church, and I now attend an Antiochian Orthodox Church, so I approach Orthodox Christianity—sometimes called Eastern Orthodox Christianity—as a whole, rather than in terms of the ethnic divisions often presented in North America: Ukrainian, Greek, Serbian, and so on. My treatment is faithful both to the Orthodox tradition's self-understanding as a unified church and to the reality of shared dogma, doctrine, theology, and sacraments. I also include the so-called Oriental Orthodox churches; the Armenians, the Copts, the Ethiopians, and other churches that were not part of particular dogmatic movements after the mid-fifth century. I do so because they are more aligned than unaligned with the rest of Orthodox Christianity and because their rites, images, and hymns have been in conversation with the same in the rest of the Orthodox world.

Regarding the endeavor of Orthodox Christian theology, my dissertation advisor Vigen Guroian writes, "Orthodox theology is, for the most part, occasional and topical."[30] Accordingly, I understand there to be many modes of Orthodox theology—including systematical, mystical, and neopatristic, as well as occasional and topical—but my project follows in the Orthodox tradition of theologically examining a specific topic due to the lack and need thereof. A more ancient Orthodox theologian, fourth-century Saint Gregory of Nyssa, advised "using every means at our disposal"[31] when doing theology. In keeping with this expression of resourcefulness, I am adaptive in my own quest to form a theology of motherhood. Therefore, I reach for all sorts of sources from across the

[30] Vigen Guroian, *Melody of Faith: Theology in an Orthodox Key* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), xi.
[31] Gregory of Nyssa, *In Canticum Canticorum,* ed. and trans. Hermann Langerbeck, (Leiden: Brill, 1960), prologue 6:4.

two-thousand-year history of Orthodoxy, including icons, hymns, scripture, rites, homilies, and even personal experiences. Like both Guroian and Gregory, I turn to Orthodox sources beyond theological texts and add my own voice to my close reading of sources in order to bring them into conversation with each other to shape a theology of motherhood. This addition of my own voice sometimes involves creativity and theological speculation, yet I believe my efforts are faithful to the spirit of Orthodox theology. I also acknowledge the limits of the practice of theology, knowing that its purpose is, in the words of twentieth-century Orthodox theologian Leonid Ouspensky, "to express by means belonging to the created world that which is infinitely above the creature."[32]

Working Within the Orthodox Tradition

My central sources for this theology of motherhood—such as texts, icons, hymns, and rites—are Orthodox. I occasionally engage interlocutors from other spheres for the sake of illustration, support, or historical context; the core sources, however, are exclusively Orthodox. I choose this approach because, as discussed earlier in the case of feminist thinkers on motherhood, other such narratives are not my own. I wish to stay within the bounds of Orthodoxy both in order to avoid confusing narratives and to do this work where I saw that it needed to be done—with the sources, language, questions, and methods of Orthodox theology. As part of this approach, I often offer introductions to Orthodox material for readers who may be unfamiliar with my sources. Of course, many of these sources are shared with the Christian West because they predate the split between Christian East and Christian West.

[32] Leonid Ouspensky, *The Meaning of Icons*, 2nd ed. (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1999), 49.

A Challenge of Working With Motherhood

When I explain my work, I often encounter a certain skepticism, mostly from outside of Orthodox circles but also within them, that hinges on a feminist concern. This concern takes the form of a charge often levied against those who work on issues of motherhood—that motherhood is all too easily idolized and that this idolization harms women and mothers by creating a paragon of motherhood that can never be achieved and in fact demoralizes women by its very existence. Christine Grenholm worries about this possibility; she explains that for this reason she aims to "focus on the everyday, rather than the extraordinary, aspects of motherhood. Motherhood is often thought to combine the two; it encompasses the extraordinary in ordinary life. In this view, the mother provides warmth, sustenance, and new life possibilities, and her unlimited care never ceases, even when all other sources have run dry. Such conceptions of motherhood easily become unrealistic, both with regard to the image of the mother and with regard to our expectations of her. It is not my aim to elevate motherhood; instead I aim for realism."[33]

I acknowledge and understand the drawbacks of elevating motherhood, and I do not wish to varnish its realities; nor do I wish to set it up as an idol. I do, however, aim to look at motherhood as an *ideal,* both because I understand the Christian aim as elevating and sanctifying the quotidian and because my project is not sociological and descriptive but rather theological and constructive. In addition, I do hold that motherhood and parenthood involve some ideal qualities. In this view, I concur with Vigen Guroian, who asks, "What is more natural and imitative of God's love than the love of parents for their children?"[34]

[33] Grenholm, *Motherhood and Love*, 2.
[34] Vigen Guroian, "The Ecclesial Family: John Chrysostom on Parenthood," in *The Child in Christian Thought*, ed. Marcia J. Bungee (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 71.

Prayer

My final, and likely most important, method for this project is prayer. I am writing this dissertation within a secular institution but also within my own tradition, Orthodox Christianity, and I would be remiss if I failed to note the role that prayer has played in the constitution of this project. Whereas those who know that I have five children seem to universally think that I am well qualified for this project on that basis alone, I have a sense of my own scholarly and personal inadequacies. It has been daunting to grapple with questions having to do with the real mystery of the creation of a new human person. As aptly reported in Ecclesiastes, "As you do not know the way of the wind, or how the bones grow in the womb of her who is with child, so you do not know the works of God (Eccles. 11:5 SAAS[35]). In such moments of perceived inadequacy, prayer has sustained me.

Here is my regular prayer before beginning work each day: "My Lord and Savior, you became human and labored with your hands until the time of your ministry. Most Holy Birthgiver of God, you as a woman labored and with your body to bring your son into the world and to care for him. Bless me as I begin this work. Help me to bring it to completion. Enlighten my mind and strengthen my body, that I may accomplish my task according to your will. Guide me to bring about works of goodness to your service and glory. Amen."

Normative Motherhood in Orthodoxy

I am well aware that one opens oneself to criticism in claiming to describe the normative expression of anything as vast and varied as motherhood. With that awareness, I have not worked in isolation in this section, but have anchored my description of normative Orthodox motherhood in the work

[35] St. Athanasius Academy of Orthodox Theology, *The Orthodox Study Bible: Ancient Christianity Speaks to Today's World* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2008). Because the entire Christian East did use (and continues to use) the Septuagint (LXX) Old Testament text, I do so as well, and I quote from the Orthodox Study Bible's LXX translation, denoting it with the abbreviation SAAS for St. Athanasius Academy Septuagint. When quoting the New Testament, I use the New King James Version because it seems to be the most commonly used English New Testament translation among the Orthodox.

of Orthodox theologians and ethicists, especially Father John Meyendorff, Vigen Guroian, and Father John Breck (a list that I will note includes no women; women have not yet written on these things within Orthodoxy). I have also included my own observations. Furthermore, my representation here of Orthodox motherhood is not a survey of anthropological or sociological sources on the topic but a description of an ideal held in the theology and culture of the Church. As a result, it often differs from the reality. For example, I write of the ban on abortion, yet Greece, a country made up almost entirely of Orthodox Christians, has one of the highest abortion rates in Europe.[36] Nor is this representation of a normative understanding of motherhood prescriptive, though later in the project I am prescriptive on several points relating to motherhood in the Church. Here, however, I am trying only to describe a basic understanding of the place of motherhood in Orthodoxy.

Women and Mothers

Within a normative Orthodox Christian framework, women can become nuns, in which case, of course, they do not become mothers.[37] In addition, although marriage and monasticism are often presented as opposed alternatives for both women and men (a questionable dichotomy in itself), there is no stated theological problem in Orthodoxy with remaining single without a religious vocation. Therefore, though one may experience cultural or social pressure to choose between marriage and the monastery,[38] some women remain unmarried and untonsured (i.e., not

[36] E. Ioannidi-Kapolou, "Use of Contraception and Abortion in Greece: A Review," *Reproductive Health Matters* 24 Suppl. (2004): 174.

[37] There is often some sort of interesting exception in the Orthodox world, such as the story of Saint Theodora/Theodore of Alexandria, the nun who disguised herself as a man in order to enter the monastic life, was then accused of having an affair with a woman, ended up being given that woman's child to raise, and thereby became a mother. See "Venerable Theodora of Alexandria," Orthodox Church in America, 2015, http://oca.org/saints/lives/2014/09/11/102570-venerable-theodora-of-alexandria.

[38] In Orthodox convention, both female and male monastic communities are referred to as monasteries; the word *convent* is not often used.

monastic). Little theological reflection in Orthodoxy has been given to this population, which, if Orthodox trends mirror larger American trends at all, is a growing one.[39] As with many topics concerning women in the Orthodox Church, one finds here a rupture between ideals and reality: Women who are neither married nor monastic and live into their fifth decade or so are sometimes scorned by their peers.[40] Even so, *woman* and *mother* are not synonyms in Orthodox theology.

Marriage

In Orthodoxy, the ideal of motherhood lives in a circumscribed place: marriage. Orthodox marriage consists of a wife and a husband, both of whom are understood to enter into marriage freely and without coercion.[41] In fact, their freedom is affirmed in the first part of the Orthodox marriage rite, in which the priest asks the bride (after asking the equivalent to the groom), "Do you [name] have a good, free, and unconstrained will and firm intention to take as your husband this man [name], whom you see here before you?"[42]

Furthermore, as Father John Meyendorff explains, marriage for Orthodox Christians is "an end in itself—a union of two beings, in love, reflecting the union between Christ and the Church."[43] Therefore, rather than getting lost in Norman Rockwell-like images of a young and healthy wife and husband with a few children underfoot, let it be noted that Orthodox marriage

[39] The *New York Times* reported in 2012 that an all-time high of 51 percent of American adult women are single. See "51% of Women Are Now Living Without a Spouse," *New York Times*, January 16, 2007, http://www.nytimes.com/2007/01/16/us/16census.html?pagewanted=all. In addition, reflections on single celibate life (both heterosexual and homosexual) are being offered in some parts of Christianity (not yet in Orthodoxy); one particularly compassionate and learned example can be found in scholar Wesley Hill's work, including *Washed and Waiting: Reflections on Christian Faithfulness and Homosexuality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010) and *Spiritual Friendship* (Ada, MI: Brazos Press, 2013).

[40] Well beyond the scope of this project lies an ethical topic that needs examination: how adults who are unmarried and not monastic should be loved and respected within Orthodox communities.

[41] Another topic in need of examination within Orthodoxy is that situation of the Orthodox Church's homosexual members. Little consideration of this topic has been offered to date, and it lies outside the scope of this project.

[42] "The Marriage Service," in John Meyendorff, *Marriage: An Orthodox Perspective* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1984), 118. This passage is often omitted from the Greek Orthodox rite.

[43] Ibid., 59.

encompasses many realities, is forgiving in theory and in practice, and does not always paint such a pretty picture. For instance, in Guroian's work on Orthodox marriage, he describes the "Orthodox understanding of marriage as a sacrament and permanent relationship whose purposes are greater than those of the two who enter into it. In such a conception of love there is room for relatives who are not chosen but 'inherited' and children who, while begotten, are not 'made to order.'"[44] Those "inherited" through marriage may of course include (among others) in-laws, stepchildren, cousins, and foster children. In addition, marriages encounter sickness and sin, all of which is understood as part of a sacrificial, sacramental, Orthodox vision of marriage.

Motherhood and Marriage

Motherhood is not expected of all Orthodox women, but it is generally hoped for of wives. The marriage rite itself mentions the hope for offspring several times and asks that the couple "be made glad with the sight of sons and daughters."[45] Meyendorff represents normative Orthodox thought on marriage when he explains that a marriage closed to children is disordered: "A marriage where children are unwelcome is founded upon a defective, egoistic and fleshly form of life. In giving life to others, man imitates God's creative act and, if he refuses to do so, he not only rejects his Creator, but also distorts his own humanity."[46]

Meyendorff is strident in his opinion about the relationship between childbearing and marriage, but there is a clear understanding in Orthodoxy of exceptions in the case of physical or mental restraints on childbearing. A few currents of Orthodox pastoral thought even suggest that childbearing within marriage may have to do with discernment—that is, that some married couples

[44] Vigen Guroian, *Incarnate Love* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1987), 85.
[45] "The Order of the Crowning," in *The Great Book of Needs*, vol. 1 (South Canaan, PA: St. Tikhon's Seminary Press, 2000), 164.
[46] Meyendorff, *Marriage: An Orthodox Perspective*, 59.

may be called to a different path. One assumes that Meyendorff would not approve. According to him, marriage, in order to be fully sacramental, must be open to childbearing; therefore, motherhood is a clear expectation of marriage.

Interestingly, Meyendorff, who is representative of most Orthodox thinkers on this point, speaks of parenthood in general in his thoughts on marriage and childbirth, not fatherhood or motherhood in particular. This might seem an obvious choice, but it is noteworthy because it places the onus of childbearing in marriage equally on husband and wife; the issue of parenthood is not off-loaded onto mothers, as it often is (or is perceived to be) in conservative American Christian discourse.[47]

In addition, as much as a truly realized Orthodox marriage must be open to children, the Orthodox tradition recognizes that children, even when desired and sought after in love, do not always come. In this case, the Church has continuously understood such marriages as in no way sacramentally marred or diminished. As John Chrysostom writes in his homily on Colossians 4:18, "But suppose there is no child; do they [the married couple] remain two and not one? No; their intercourse effects the joining of their bodies, and they are made one, just as when perfume is mixed with ointment."[48] Orthodox ethicist Father John Breck echoes this claim sixteen hundred years later: "If a husband and wife are unable to conceive for any reason, their conjugal union as such is not diminished."[49] This stance is an extension of the theological and ethical vision of marriage in Orthodoxy, which understands children as an important part of the unitive good of marriage but not as a definitive characteristic of marriage.

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[47] See, for example, the QuiverFull movement: QuiverFull home page, n.d., http://www.quiverfull.com/.
[48] John Chrysostom, "Homily 12 on Colossians 4:18," in *On Marriage and Family Life*, trans. Catherine P. Roth and David Anderson (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1986), 76.
[49] John Breck, *The Sacred Gift of Life* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1998), 89.

This Orthodox vision of marriage allows for a spiritually meaningful understanding of sexual relations within marriage regardless of procreative intent. As Guroian writes, "Husband and wife are joined together as one in holy matrimony. They are an ecclesial unity, one flesh, one body incorporate of two persons who in freedom and sexual love and through their relationship to Christ image the triune life of the Godhead."[50] Because the child is not the only witness to the conjugal being that is a married couple, one can make a strong argument for marriage being open not only to the possibility of children but also to sex itself. That is, the sexual act, which ought to be—at appropriate times—open to conception, is what brings the couple together into the one-flesh being. Therefore, in Orthodox thought, which privileges the unitive, reparative bond of marriage, an infertile marriage is just as robust and true as a child-filled one, though it may suffer the pain and problems accompanying infertility.

By extension, just as the marriage of a wife and husband unable to bear children is every bit as authentic as a marriage full of babies, a woman is not sullied by lack of motherhood. Rather, she is just as fully woman and wife as the mother of nine down the street. Although wives are typically expected within an Orthodox context to become mothers if at all possible, neither their station as wife nor their station as woman is diminished if motherhood does not come to pass; in short, motherhood is by no means a prerequisite for wifeship or full womanhood. While this fact is clear in a theological examination of womanhood, wifeship, and motherhood, it is unfortunately, however, not always clear in daily lived Orthodox experience, and this difference points to the need for a full articulation of marriage and parenthood by the theologians and pastors of the Church.

Finally, even though motherhood is normatively placed within the bounds of marriage, children are regularly born to unmarried mothers and fathers. In an Orthodox vision of

[50] Guroian, *Incarnate Love*, 88.

motherhood, this is less than ideal, but these mothers are no less important than any other mother; to the contrary, they have the same obligations to their child's health and salvation as any mother.

Motherhood, Contraception, and Abortion

The fact that children are an expected part of sacramental marriage does not mean that Orthodox couples should endlessly bear children with no regard for other factors. Orthodoxy provides no universal dictum on family planning or the use of contraception, but this lack of unilateral decree does not indicate lack of interest. In fact, Orthodox priests in the United States are known to offer a variety of advice and admonition on these topics. It seems that most priests advocate the view that such matters call not for universal rules but for personal discernment. For example, safe contraception is often welcome in the Orthodox context, but it is understood that it should not be used at a whim or without reflection. Meyendorff reflects on what seems to be the prevailing thought among Orthodox clergy, "The question of birth control and of its acceptable forms can only be solved by individual Christian couples. They can make the right decision only if they accept their Christian commitment with ultimate seriousness, if they believe in the providence of God, if they avoid being concerned too much with material security ('Do not lay up for yourself treasures on earth,' Matthew 6:19), if they realize children are a great joy and a gift of God, if their love is not a selfish or egoistic one, [and] if they remember that love reduced to sexual pleasure is not true love."[51]

In addition, even with the carefully discerned use of contraception, an Orthodox marriage is always open to children insofar as contraception failures do occur and abortion is canonically and theologically prohibited. Many defenses have been offered for the Orthodox ban on abortion, and

[51] Meyendorff, *Marriage: An Orthodox Perspective*, 62. Meyendorff also writes that "in an affluent American society, there is practically never a sufficient reason to avoid children in the first two years of marriage," 62–63.

opinions vary on the extreme cases of the mother's life being in jeopardy and of rape and incest. The most fundamental reason for the Orthodox rejection of abortion—which has been in place from the earliest days of the Church—involves the significance that Orthodoxy accords to each human life. The Church's stance on abortion is long held, and it stands firm in the face of the broader culture's embrace of abortive technologies. Such a strong ban on abortion means that a woman who is unhappily pregnant must take action to ensure her child's life. To this end, Orthodox adoption services are offered in the United States.

Alongside the rigorous defense of the "infinite value of each human life," some Orthodox Christians are looking to develop a rite that soothes the wounded souls of mothers and fathers who have had an experience with abortion and that promotes awareness of the fact that coercion and manipulation can play a significant role in abortion. In addition, prayers and rituals are being developed across the country to pray for the deceased unborn, both aborted and miscarried.[52] This concern for women and men who have had an experience with abortion provides them with the means to heal and also shows the Church's real dedication to the infinite value of each human life.

Female and Male

Although parenthood is expected and talked about in terms of both mothers and fathers, Orthodox theology contains no consistent understanding of femaleness and maleness, other than that they are complementary and are—as referenced earlier by Basil—equal in dignity and salvation. The patristic thinkers seem unconcerned with connecting specific attributes to either female or male, and their work on deification (the Orthodox concept similar to salvation) and other theological

[52] The Orthodox Church in America adopted new rites relating to miscarriage and stillbirth in 2013 as the result of the work of laywoman Dennise Kraus and Bishop Michael Dahulich of New Jersey. See "Holy Synod of Bishops Concludes Fall Session," Orthodox Church in America, October 18, 2013, http://oca.org/news/headline-news/holy-synod-of-bishops-concludes-fall-session1. I mention this work again in chapter 5.

concepts is generally directed at the human condition rather than focusing on what it means to be female or male. In contrast, more recent Orthodox thinkers—especially the Russian theologians of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—skew toward an essentialist perception of the female and the male condition. This perception ascribes to each a set of innate, dominant, and complementary qualities, such as "activity" and "passivity."[53]

There is no consensus in Orthodoxy on this subject of supposed female and male ontological qualities. I have serious concerns about the ways in which such characteristics have been discussed in Orthodox theology over the last century or so, including those expressed in the work of twentieth-century Orthodox theologian Paul Evdokimov (whose work I otherwise admire), because this way of speaking about female and male seems to inevitably reduce and therefore undervalue both female and male. Still, for the purposes of this project, it must be said that there is an implicit and accepted understanding in Orthodox thought that regardless of—or in addition to—the innate qualities of female and male, motherhood and fatherhood are not the same thing. The biological act of motherhood—or the potential for it—provides grounds, in itself, for making a distinction between motherhood and fatherhood. In this regard, Orthodox theologian Virginia Kimball is representative of Orthodox thought when she writes that "being a mother is an experience that obviously belongs only to women. No man can possibly 'know' the experience."[54] The assertion that motherhood is its own, unknowable-to-men experience that "obviously belongs only to women" brooks no argument in Orthodox circles.

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[53] For Orthodox discussions of this issue, see Paul Evdokimov, *Women and the Salvation of the World*, trans. Anthony P. Gythiel (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1994); Paul Evdokimov, *The Sacrament of Love*, trans. Anthony P. Gythiel and Victoria Steadman (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985); Elisabeth Behr-Sigel, *The Ministry of Women in the Church*, trans. Steve Bigham (Redondo Beach, CA: Oakwood Publications, 1987); and Alexander Schmemann, *For the Life of the World* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1988).

[54] Virginia Kimball, "Theotokos, Mother of All People," *Marian Studies: Proceedings of the National Convention of the Mariological Society of America* 57 (2006): 62.

Conception, Pregnancy, Birthgiving, and Postpartum

Just as I have titled this chapter "Anticipation" as a complement to the anticipation experienced by a woman headed toward motherhood, each subsequent chapter is also named after a stage of biological motherhood. I now explain the reasons behind that structural choice, introduce the three primary theses of this project, and offer brief chapter previews.

Structure of Chapters According to Biological Stage

I have structured this project by the biological stages of motherhood— rather than orienting it on the basis of preset theological categories—for a few reasons. First, this structure honors the journey that a woman most often goes through in her path to motherhood, a journey that affects her mind, her spirit, and—undeniably to her and all around her—her body. This anchoring of the dissertation in the physical stages of motherhood appeals to me also because I find the Orthodox sources on motherhood to be deeply invested in the maternal body, and this embrace of the maternal body is an important gift that a theology of motherhood offers to the Orthodox Church. Finally, the way that the chapters progress through the biological sequence of motherhood reflects the continuum of theological thought developed throughout the chapters.

The second sentence of the preceding paragraph includes a pointed qualification. It refers to the journey that a woman *most often* takes in her path to motherhood, and I hereby note and respect the completely valid alternate paths to motherhood: adoption and fostering. Though structured by biology, the theology of motherhood offered here is not exclusive to biology, as seen both in my earlier definition of motherhood in this chapter and in the discussion of motherhood and free will included in chapter 2. Furthermore, discussions of the physicality of motherhood have much to offer to adoptive and foster mothers; their experience does not include swollen ankles from late pregnancy, but motherhood is always a deeply physical experience.

Although this dissertation ends with the postpartum time frame, motherhood of course does not end there, and neither does a theology of motherhood. Indeed, motherhood continues as long as a mother lives, and—in the Orthodox understanding of things—it is not even erased by death. My decision to end the dissertation with the postpartum time was made with the intuition that the early, extremely physical stages of motherhood represented here speak, in some way, to all the days of motherhood: for example, the mothering of teenagers, the mothering of adults, and the mourning of a child who dies before her or his mother does. At a later date, I would like to delve more specifically into these aspects of lived motherhood beyond the early stages, but for now I focus on the time ranging from conception to the postpartum period with the confidence that these stages have much to offer theological thought on motherhood in all stages.

Three Primary Theses

This dissertation puts forward three primary theses, to which I have alluded and which I now make explicit. I went to the Orthodox sources on motherhood with one main question: What do they tell me about an Orthodox theological vision of motherhood? I found three main answers, and from them I composed the following theses, which I elucidate in the following paragraphs: first, the Orthodox sources on motherhood provide a special reminder of the esteem Orthodox Christianity has for the human body; second, these sources offer an ideal of Christian kinship expressed in maternal kinship; and third, what these sources theologically offer in terms of the maternal body and maternal kinship will not only illuminate the largely unexamined reality of motherhood, but they will also serve to promote and expand Orthodox Christianity's understandings of the human body and kinship.

First, an examination of motherhood both necessitates and facilitates a Christian embrace of the human body. This sort of thinking about the body has long been a source of fascination in

Christian circles. For example, the second-century Christian writer Tertullian dedicated an entire treatise to the exploration and defense of the resurrection of the corporeal body. After writing *On the Resurrection of the Flesh,* Tertullian left orthodox Christianity, yet his work on the body stands as authentically Christian and is very influential in the Orthodox tradition. He presented the human body as the "flesh and minister of the soul," as the soul's "associate and co-heir," and as something "formed in the image" of God.[55] He also insisted that the body's destiny is to "inherit paradise."[56] In so doing, he shaped the Christian understanding of the body as a work of God that is destined for eternity.

This strong reverence for the body continued beyond Tertullian, but no consensus was formed in the patristic era, nor has one been formed in the current era, as to the changes wrought on the body by the Fall. For example, Basil felt that the body was somewhat altered by the Fall, becoming corruptible and being reduced from its created state,[57] whereas Gregory of Nyssa went further in saying that the body was drastically altered by the Fall and that the reproductive body was not part of original creation but was generated by the Fall.[58] These different understandings of the human body and the Fall—which came from men who shared the same mother; Gregory and Basil were brothers—have long lasting consequences, as will be seen in subsequent chapters, especially chapter 5.

Even as such questions of the body and the Fall remain, there is a strong appreciation within Orthodoxy for the Creator-fashioned aspect of the human body and an anticipation of the restoration of the body in the life to come. From this understanding of the body as created by God

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[55] Tertullian, "On the Resurrection of the Flesh," trans. Peter Holmes, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 3, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing, 1885), rev. and ed. for New Advent by Kevin Knight, 2009, http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0316.htm, chapters 7 and 9.
[56] Ibid., chapter 26.
[57] Basil of Caesarea, *On the Human Condition,* chapter I.6, 35.
[58] Gregory of Nyssa, "On the Creation of Man," trans. by H.A. Wilson in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers,* vol. 5, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1893), rev. and ed. for New Advent by Kevin Knight, 2009, http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/2914.htm, chapter 16.4.

in paradise, and fulfilled in the world to come, springs a deep reverence for the body in the present. Granted, the body may be understood as both a means and an obstacle to virtue—as fourth-century Saint Gregory of Nazianzus put it[59]—but it also requires reverence, based on both where it has been and where it is going. In addition, it requires reverence in the sense that the body does not exist in dualistic isolation from the rest of the human; indeed, the body and soul are intimately intertwined. This reverence is a key part of the understanding of human beings in Orthodox Christianity.

Despite this continued reverence for the body, aberrations have arisen, even within Orthodox Christian thought, that have led to an unfortunate dichotomy between the body and the soul. This split often results in poor theological conceptions of sexuality. As John Chryssavgis notes, "Unfortunately, a great deal of our discourse on sexual love is tainted not so much by wrong ideas (and practices) as by a dissociation of sensibility, a dissection of life, where physical activity is detached from the life of the spirit, or the life of the spirit is detached from bodily experience."[60] Furthermore, even when the Orthodox reverence for the body has remained intact, it has not always been applied to women's bodies or to mother's bodies, as will be seen in chapters 4 and 5.

Motherhood is, by definition, unavoidably visceral, and this viscerality is reflected in Orthodox sources. Highlighting these sources brings the body to the forefront in a way that other theologies do not, and it does so in a manner that is true to humanity's incarnate nature—true to the Incarnation of Jesus Christ—and that counteracts dualistic understandings of the body. In the chapters that follow, I seek the meaning of the bodily experience of Christian motherhood through Orthodox sources. I also observe the ways in which certain practices have undermined Christian

[59] Gregory of Nazianzus, "Festal Orations," trans. H.A. Wilson, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, vol. 5., ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing, 1893), rev. and ed. for New Advent by Kevin Knight, 2009, http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/310238.htm, chapter 38.
[60] John Chryssavgis, *Love, Sexuality, and the Sacrament of Marriage* (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2005), 4–5.

theology by positing dualistic experiences of the body for mothers. I suggest that examining and appreciating the maternal body not only constitutes an authentically Orthodox endeavor but also can bring all Christians closer to living in a fully human manner in which body and soul are married as one.

My second thesis is that the kinship between mother and child, when rightly ordered, provides an example of the innate connectedness of human persons. In the Orthodox view of the world, the ultimate journey is for a human person to become closer to God, to become more God-like. In the words of a maxim attributed to multiple patristic thinkers, "God became man in order that man might become God." Yet this characterization can be a bit misleading. In the way it is often formulated in English, the original Greek's inclusion of both man *and woman* is lost. Additionally, the human side of the equation is often expressed in the singular, when really it ought to be understood in the plural: "God became human in order than *humans* might become God."

This journey is not a solitary one; rather, it happens in community. In some sense the call to "become God," or become "like God," as it is sometimes expressed, is a collective one. Part of "becoming God" is acquiring godly love for all of creation, which entails loving each person that one encounters. As Chryssavgis notes, "Human love, just as man himself, and as woman herself, can be a glorious image of divine love."[61] Human life occurs, almost by definition, in community; "life is inherently, intrinsically, and intensely communal, interpersonal,"[62] and part of living a Godly human life is to embrace this communal living. The mother-and-child kinship, which is on display in Orthodox sources on motherhood, forms a particular part of this communal living and offers a sense of human kinship that can extend beyond the bounds of this singular relationship. This connectedness has a didactic quality—for women and men, mothers and nonmothers—that can

[61] Ibid., 3.
[62] Ibid., 14.

repair isolation and bring humans into fuller communion with each other, with God, and with creation.

Third, a close encounter with mothers, conception, pregnancy, and birthgiving, and the postpartum period—topics not often explored in Orthodoxy—can change and help to fulfill Christianity with and through its perspective on the maternal body and maternal kinship. As demonstrated in this chapter, when this endeavor is undertaken in the context of Orthodox Christianity, it does not require a radical reconstitution of source material. Indeed, Orthodoxy was founded on an act of motherhood, and its churches are filled with images and songs of women, many of which are maternal in theme. The endeavor does, however, require fresh eyes to view the Christian mystery through the lens of motherhood. I seek an embrace of motherhood, and the maternal, within Orthodoxy, and I believe that this embrace offers much to those interested in motherhood from other quarters as well.

Chapter Descriptions

When I approached the Orthodox sources on motherhood with the question of what they offer to a theological view of motherhood, I found the responses just outlined in my three theses. I chose to structure each chapter of this project accordingly because these three theses not only provide the strongest answers to my query but also present themes that turned up over and over again in my research across time and geographical space. Therefore, each chapter devotes a section to how the sources at hand inform an understanding of a mother's body—what I refer to as the "maternal body." Each chapter devotes a second section to how the sources form an understanding of the mother-and-child kinship, which I refer to as "maternal kinship," and how that understanding might extend to other relationships. The third thesis—that a close examination of motherhood offers a

fresh lens on Christian experience and theology—is embedded in the both sections and brought out in the conclusion of each chapter.

Beyond this direct treatment of the three theses, each chapter begins with musings on the physical realities of motherhood at each certain biological stage because I wish to ground this entire project in the lived experience of motherhood. I then offer personal reflections on my own experience as a mother, not because I think it so exceptional or virtuous but I wish to illustrate the fact that motherhood is deeply personal. Furthermore, motherhood is a station of life that is defined by a relationship between two people; therefore, the topic is inextricably bound up with kinship. I thus present a bit of my experience to remind readers, and myself, that motherhood is defined by unique human persons and their connections to each other. I also hope that these vignettes make clear that this work comes from me, personally—that my thoughts on motherhood are shaped by my experience of it.

Next, I situate the biological focus of the chapter within a broad Orthodox context, noting its presence in hymns, feasts, icons, and the like. Then I turn to two or three Orthodox sources on motherhood, which serve as the central motifs in the chapter's sections addressing the maternal body and maternal kinship. I introduce these motifs purposefully by addressing their historical context and significance. I do not pretend, however, to give equal weight or attention to each; instead, I preface more thoroughly those that require more unpacking, and I dwell longest on those that are most fruitful for this project. Furthermore, these motifs, and the conclusions I draw from them, are not the only information to come out of this study of theology and motherhood. Along the way, I also include smaller, related, source-based musings and observations, such as a subsection of chapter 2 that considers how Orthodoxy theologically understands infertility. I conclude each chapter by indicating possibilities for a richer theological understanding of

motherhood or by considering ways in which Orthodox praxis might change in order to better reflect an Orthodox understanding of motherhood and better support mothers.

To some extent, the chapters are progressively prescriptive. In chapters 2 and 3, I make a few mild suggestions for pastoral change; in chapter 4, I advocate for a shift in theological viewpoint on the Birthgiver's birthgiving; and in chapter 5, I make the case for change in the Church's rites. I did not plan for this growing constructive quality to unfold over the course of the chapters; it is simply what the source material demanded, given its context in this theology of motherhood.

Chapter 2, "Conception," focuses on the very beginning of motherhood: the hope and mystery of forming a child in one's womb. I engage with the story of Anna, the mother of the Birthgiver, who remained infertile into late age, at which point she conceived her daughter. I use an icon of her and her husband Joachim, often titled *The Conception of the Theotokos*, to illustrate the Orthodox celebration of marital sexuality, which provides the starting point for an Orthodox examination of the maternal body. I also look to the ways in which a mother can order her kinship with her child and with God in prayer. In addition, I consider two textual sources: John Chrysostom's musings on motherhood and an *Annunciation* icon. These texts point to an understanding of motherhood that values the role of free will in an illuminating manner for a theological understanding both of motherhood and of communion between human persons. I conclude the chapter with suggestions for the creation and distribution of pre-conceptive prayers for Orthodox women.

Chapter 3, "Pregnancy," focuses on the time when a woman carries a newly created child in her womb. Although an icon is integrated into the project in chapter 2, chapter 3 contains my explicit examination of the meaning of icons in Orthodoxy and their significance for this project. In particular, I examine how the maternity of the Birthgiver was critical to the development and

preservation of icons. This discussion incorporates writings about the meaning of icons by Orthodox theologians past and present. I also work with two particular maternal icons. The first is the *Ustyug Annunciation* icon—a variation on the more typical *Annunciation* seen in chapter 2—which displays and celebrates the pregnant form by showing a shadowy Christ in the Birthgiver's womb. The second is the Visitation icon type, which depicts the Birthgiver and Saint Elizabeth, mother of John the Baptist, spending time together during their pregnancies (Luke 1:41–45). I examine this icon for insight into the possibilities of maternal kinship and of encountering God through maternal love. I conclude the chapter with an exploration of how the influx of women into the ranks of iconographers may change and develop the ways in which the maternal body is depicted in icons. I also note other ways in which the Orthodox Church might helpfully and publically demonstrate its reverence for the pregnant form and for pregnant women.

Chapter 4, "Birthgiving," looks at the momentous occasion of childbirth. Everyone is born from a mother, including Jesus Christ. Thus, this chapter asks whether the Birthgiver's exceptional circumstances preclude her birthgiving from offering meaning for a theology of motherhood. Although I engage with Marian material in the previous chapters, I pointedly turn here to her birthgiving and its portrayal in Mariological doctrine and hymns. I embrace an understanding of the Birthgiver's birthgiving that protects Jesus Christ's humanity and illustrates that he sanctified birthgiving by experiencing it, which, in turn, allows mothers a deep connection with the Birthgiver's own labor and delivery of her son. I also examine two variations of the Nativity of Christ icon type, and, while making the case that both are theologically sound, I advocate for continued use of the ancient version that depicts the Birthgiver "pondering these things in her heart" and thus offers a vision of the cultivation of kinship through maternal contemplation.

Chapter 5, "Postpartum," focuses on the time immediately following childbirth, when the mother is recuperating from delivery, adjusting to her changing body, and getting to know her new

child. The central sources for this chapter are the postpartum rites of the Orthodox Church known as First Day (prayed by the priest at the bedside of the new mother soon after birth) and Churching (celebrated when the mother returns to church, with her baby, for the first time after childbirth). The existence of these rites is significant both because they offer liturgical hospitality to the new mother and her child and because they frame her experience of motherhood as a spiritual endeavor instead of a worldly one. Yet the rites themselves are historically variable and include theologically unsound elements connecting childbirth with impurity in a way that is incompatible with an Orthodox understanding of the human body. I conclude that they need to be altered in order to align both with the understanding of the maternal body present in other Orthodox sources (as examined in previous chapters) and with the more general theology of the body in Orthodoxy. I also examine an icon of the *Presentation of the Theotokos*, which depicts the Birthgiver's first entrance into the temple, to illustrate how it offers a visual expression of hospitality—one that might be included in the postpartum rites.

Conclusion

This is a work of constructive theology focused on a theological exploration of motherhood. It was born, as it were, in the academy at the University of Virginia but it was also born inside of, is directed at, and is faithful to the Orthodox Christian theological tradition. It is time for theological contemplation of motherhood to occur within the context of Orthodox theology, and I hope that this project will be just one such effort. Motherhood carries many theological meanings and many theological expressions—not just those explored here. Fittingly, Gregory of Nyssa likened the Christian life to a series of births:

> What is subject to change is in a sense always coming to birth. In mutable nature nothing can be observed which is always the same. Being born, in the sense of continually experiencing change, does not come about as the result of external initiative, as is the case with the birth of the body. . . . [Rather,] such a birth occurs by free choice in accordance with whatever forms we wish to have . . . [by] molding ourselves to the principle of either virtue or vice.[63]

May this project be part of the birth of new theologies having to do with motherhood, women, and women's bodies—for all people, and especially for the virtue of the Orthodox Church and her mothers.

[63] Gregory of Nyssa, "Life of Moses," in *Gregory of Nyssa,* trans. Abraham J. Malherbe and Everett Ferguson (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), 55.

Chapter 2: Conception

Introduction

Conception marks the beginning of a woman's movement into motherhood. In technical terms, human conception is the union of an ovum from a woman and a spermatozoon from a man. In Orthodox thinking, conception is understood as the advent of a new person, which results from the sexual union of his or her parents as well as an act of God. The emphasis here is not placed on the biological precision of the fusion of gametes but on the person created in divine-human partnership.[1] The divine significance of conception is highlighted by the Prophet Jeremiah when he speaks of God's acquaintance with each person before birth: "Then the word of the Lord came to me, saying: 'Before I formed you in the womb I knew you; and before you were born I sanctified you'" (Jer.1.4–5 SAAS).

A woman who hopes to be a mother looks forward to the conceptive union with her husband and remains hopeful in the time between then and the detection of a pregnancy. Conception carries a connotation of immediacy that is not borne out by biological reality. The sexual act and the creation of a zygote are separated by a period of hours or days. This is followed by another span of time before the woman begins to feel signs of pregnancy or is otherwise able to verify her pregnancy—often ten days, if not three or four weeks.

Nor, of course, does conception always proceed as planned. Sometimes intentionally procreative intercourse does not result in pregnancy, which leaves a wife and husband to ponder how to pray in their situation and what action they might take next. In my own case, my husband

[1] In order to avoid confining this mystery to merely scientific terms, Orthodox theologians and ethicists generally do not pinpoint an exact biological moment of personhood. This stance is a source of pride and relief to me as the mother of identical twins (my triplets include a pair of identical girls); the strident claim that a person begins at the union of ovum and spermatozoon would blur my girls' personhood.

and I long considered whether to have a third child, and then, as I noted in chapter 1, I ended up having not just a third child but a third, a fourth, and a fifth child. This news came to me during a routine ultrasound more than a third of the way through my pregnancy, and it was as shocking as any news I have ever received. My own story illustrates the unpredictability involved in trying to conceive and the fact that this period of a mother's journey is often characterized by surprises and complications.

With or without surprise or complication, the act of conception is a private one—a quality that contrasts with the treatment of the topic in the Orthodox Church, which is very public in its portrayal of conception in hymns, images, and feasts. More specifically, three feasts of conception are included in the high days of the Church: the Annunciation (the Birthgiver's conception of her son, Jesus Christ), the Conception of the Theotokos (Saint Anna and Saint Joachim's conception of their daughter, the Birthgiver herself), and the Conception of Saint John the Baptist (Saint Elizabeth and Saint Zechariah's conception of their son, John). Icons of these feasts, especially the first two, appear in nearly every Orthodox church, often in a place of prominence on the iconostasis—the icon screen at the front of the nave. In addition, the festal Vespers and Liturgies are replete with hymns celebrating these conceptions. For example, on the feast of the Conception of Saint John, the faithful sing, "Great Zacharias radiantly rejoices together with Elizabeth: she worthily conceived John the Forerunner whom the Angel announced with great gladness and whom we honour as an initiate of grace."[2] Two of the feasts concerning conception are firmly grounded in the New Testament—the Annunciation (Luke 1:26–39) and the Conception of John (Luke 1:5–25)—and are preceded in scripture by typological tales of miraculous or improbable conceptions, including the stories of Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, Leah, Sampson's mother, and Hannah. These holy

[2] "Conception of John the Baptist," Kontakion, Tone 1, Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America, n.d., http://www.antiochian.org/node/20526.

conceptions, and others, are also referred to in the marriage rite when the following words are prayed over the couple: "Thou didst bless Thy servant Abraham, and opening the womb of Sarah didst make him to be the father of many nations. Thou didst give Isaac to Rebecca, and didst bless her in childbearing. . . ."[3] Anna's conception of the Birthgiver of God is not preserved in scripture, but is ensconced in Orthodox tradition, most notably in the second-century document the *Protoevangelium of James*.

In these sources and others, Orthodox Christianity contains ample resources with which to consider a theology of conception—the starting point both of motherhood and of a new human person. One such source, the story and iconography of Anna, taken collectively, is central to this chapter. The chapter's first section, which addresses the maternal body, examines traditions regarding Anna in order to illuminate the esteem in which Orthodoxy holds marital conjugality, which provides the basis for a theological understanding of motherhood. (A full discussion of icons and their significance in Orthodox theology is provided in chapter 3; here it suffices to say that Orthodox churches are filled with images of saints and festal scenes that are contemplated and venerated by the faithful in order to enter into a deeper relationship with God and the saints.) Anna's conception presents an instructive embrace of embodied human existence. This section has my special affection because Anna is my own saint, with whose epithet I was most enamored as a small child: "Ancestor of God." I also reflect in this section on Orthodox understandings of cases involving a lack of conception—cases of infertility—in order to acknowledge this reality of the pursuit of motherhood. This discussion is also prompted by Anna's own struggle with infertility for most of her life. Finally, both this section and the next one touch on Orthodox theological anthropology—that is, the understanding of what constitutes a human person.

[3] John Meyendorff, "The Marriage Service," in *Marriage: An Orthodox Perspective*, 2nd ed. (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1984), 116.

The second part of the chapter, devoted to maternal kinship, turns to the ways in which a mother connects with her child and with God, both in prayer and in intentionality. It also considers the manner in which Orthodox sources illumine the relationship between free will and grace in the context of motherhood. Here, I examine two sources: John Chrysostom's musings on Hannah, and the Annunciation story and icon. I introduce these sources and situate Chrysostom's thoughts on motherhood in relation to his reputation, in some circles, as a misogynist; as someone who supports the oppression of women. Chrysostom's musings on motherhood offer an understanding both of how prayer can formatively shape the mother's relationship with her child and of how motherhood is rightly understood as something to be embraced with one's free will. The Annunciation icon type furthers this thought on free will as it exemplifies the relationship between free will and grace in motherhood.

I conclude the chapter with remarks on how these Orthodox sources on conception set the stage for theological contemplation of pregnancy, birthgiving, and early motherhood. I also comment on possibilities for further theological and pastoral work on the topic of prayer and conception in Orthodoxy.

Maternal Body: Conjugality

Anyone who runs into a woman in late pregnancy at the store knows full well that motherhood is a physical affair. The act of conception, though private, shares that physicality in two ways. First, in normative Orthodox experience the woman experiences the very physical act of sexual union with her husband, which marks the beginning of her maternal body. Second, in doing so, she offers herself up to the very physical experience of pregnancy and childbearing. That is, in the act of sexual union she invites, with the grace of God, another human to share her bodily form. This invitation constitutes the ultimate act of hospitality, and in the Orthodox Church the hospitality of

the maternal body is expressed in Anna's story and iconography. The sources that form Anna's tradition highlight the importance and sacredness of the human body for mothers and, by extension, for nonmothers.

Anna's Prayer

The feast of the Righteous Anna's Conception of the Mother of God was officially included in the church calendar in the eighth century,[4] but the story of her conception of the Birthgiver dates to a much earlier time. This tale comes not from scripture but from tradition, which likely began as oral stories of the life of the Birthgiver and her parents. These traditions are primarily recorded in the second-century Christian document, the *Protoevangelium of James*. Though Anna and Joachim were Jewish, the *Protoevangelium* and other traditional sources addressing them were composed entirely within the Christian sphere. Unlike the canonical gospels, the *Protoevangelium* offers many details of the Birthgiver's conception, birthgiving, and upbringing—so much information, in fact, that providing these details seems to be one of the document's purposes.[5] In the Christian East, the *Protoevangelium* has been known and engaged with consistently from its inception, and, as church historian John Reumann notes, "its stories [have been] . . . well known everywhere through numerous secondary apocrypha based on its material."[6] For example, the document was clearly known to early Christian thinkers including Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Hippolytus, and Tertullian and probably also to other patristic theologians.[7] Reumann rightly observes that this text has "dominated the development of the Marian legend, providing much of the basic material for

[4] Mary B. Cunningham, "Introduction," in *Wider Than Heaven: Eighth-Century Homilies on the Mother of God* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2008), 26. The eighth century, give or take a hundred years or so, was the time when many feasts were first celebrated in a widespread fashion and were first placed on the Church calendar.
[5] It seems based on the text that a second express purpose of the *Protoevangelium* is to repeatedly and creatively assert the virginity of the Birthgiver, as well as her atypical birthgiving experience. I return to this topic in chapter 4.
[6] John Reumann, *Mary in the New Testament* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1978), 256.
[7] Ibid., 256.

Mary's biography."[8] It has therefore has enormously influenced the church's iconographic, hymnic, and homiletic depictions of the Birthgiver. In fact, this text is so central to Orthodoxy's encounter with motherhood that it is referenced in each chapter of this project.

The *Protoevangelium* contains the story of the "Ancestors of God," the Birthgiver's parents Joachim and Anna, who, to their great disappointment and public shame, arrived in old age childless. Anna is said to have "prayed to the Lord, saying: O God of our fathers, bless me and hear my prayer, as You blessed the womb of Sarah, and gave her a son Isaac."[9] The account continues:

> And gazing towards the heaven, she saw a sparrow's nest in the laurel, and made lamentation in herself, saying: Alas! Who begot me? And what womb produced me? Because I have become a curse in the presence of the sons of Israel, and I have been reproached, and they have driven me in derision out of the temple of the Lord. Alas! To what have I been likened? I am not like the fowls of the heaven, because even the fowls of the heaven are productive before You, O Lord. Alas! To what have I been likened? I am not like the beasts of the earth, because even the beasts of the earth are productive before You, O Lord. Alas! To what have I been likened? I am not like these waters, because even these waters are productive before You, O Lord. Alas! To what have I been likened? I am not like this earth, because even the earth brings forth its fruits in season, and blesses You, O Lord.[10]

Some icons of this scene of Anna's prayer for children depict her in a garden, sorrowfully contemplating the young sparrows in their nest. Seeing motherhood before her in its avian form, Anna desires to share this experience with her fellow creature, and it pains her that the plants and waters and even the earth seem to procreate even as she does not.

The answer to Anna's prayer is swift and definitive: "And, behold, an angel of the Lord stood by, saying: Anna, Anna, the Lord has heard your prayer, and you shall conceive, and shall

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[8] Ibid., 248–49.
[9] "Protoevangelium of James," in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 8., ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, trans. Alexander Walker (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing, 1886), rev. and ed. for New Advent by Kevin Knight, 2009, http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0847.htm, section 2.
[10] Ibid., sec 3.

bring forth; and your seed shall be spoken of in all the world."[11] Anna replies, "As the Lord my God lives, if I beget either male or female, I will bring it as a gift to the Lord my God; and it shall minister to Him in holy things all the days of its life."[12]

Joachim has also secluded himself in the natural world in prayer, and he also encounters a holy messenger who bears the news from God that his and Anna's sorrow will soon end. The two rush home to meet each other: "And, behold, Joachim came with his flocks; and Anna stood by the gate, and saw Joachim coming, and she ran and hung upon his neck, saying: Now I know that the Lord God has blessed me exceedingly; for, behold . . . I the childless shall conceive. And Joachim rested the first day in his house."[13] The phrase "rested in his house" intimates that Anna and Joachim unite sexually and conceive, and, indeed, nine months later Anna gives birth to Mary, the Birthgiver of God, which brings great joy to herself and to Joachim.

Intercession and Infertility

Anna's situation and fervent prayers draw attention to the experience of women who long for children but have not conceived or cannot do so. What is the appropriate response to this experience? When Anna struggled with barrenness, she took her struggle to God in prayer, and this act led to her conception of the Birthgiver. Her story, along with the many scriptural accounts of barren women turned fertile through prayer, may seem fraught when applied to more pedestrian situations. How are women who are not the mother of a saint or prophet—or of anyone—to understand their own struggles with fertility in light of these stories?

[11] Ibid., sec 4.
[12] Ibid., sec 4. Anna's reply is reminiscent of Hannah's in I Kingdoms/I Samuel 1:11.
[13] Ibid., sec 4.

One of Anna's sisters in infertility was Hannah, the Old Testament[14] mother of the prophet Samuel. In his reflections on Hannah—which I explore in more depth later in this chapter—John Chrysostom offers one vision of how a Christian might face struggles with infertility. He is sympathetic to the burden of barrenness that Hannah experienced, and he appreciates the effect of changing cultural values regarding childbirth when he contrasts barrenness in his own time with that of Hannah's: "Yet if it is so intolerable these days when we are called to much higher values and are on our way to heaven, when no thought for present realities affects us, and instead we are preparing ourselves for a different life and the esteem for virginity is high, think of how great an affliction the matter was considered in those days when there was not the slightest hope of a future, not any conception of it by people of olden times, and instead they did everything with an eye to present realities, and being barren and childless was a sort of curse and a death sentence."[15]

In addition to his sympathy for childless women, Chrysostom also understands God to be intimately involved in—and critical to—the conception of every child: "Many people are so unreasonable in their attitude as to rebuke their wives when they do not have children, not realizing that having children has its origins on high, in God's providence, and it is not the nature of a wife or sexual intercourse or anything else that is solely responsible for it."[16] This understanding is universally held in Orthodoxy. The formation of a new human person depends not only on the sexual union of the wife and husband; God also plays a role. In addition, and again reflecting a common theme in church tradition, Chrysostom understands Hannah's tale of once being barren

[14] I use the title "Old Testament" in the context of this project for a few reasons. It acknowledges that my early Christian interlocutors were reading the Septuagint (LXX) in Greek instead of the Masoretic text of the Hebrew Bible, and it also acknowledges that it was understood by them to be the "Old Testament," or just "scripture." In addition, even later, when Christians in the West started to translate into the vernacular from the Masoretic text, the Septuagint was still the version of scripture used in the Orthodox world, as it continues to be. Furthermore, the term "Old Testament" describes the Christian hermeneutic status of that part of scripture, insofar as Christians have historically enacted a different hermeneutic when reading the Old Testament than when reading the New Testament.

[15] John Chrysostom, "Homily 2 on Hannah," in *Old Testament Homilies,* trans. Robert C. Hill (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2003), 83.

[16] Chrysostom, "Homily 1 on Hannah," *Old Testament Homilies*, 75.

and then being transformed by God into a fertile woman as making her all the more special.[17] A Christian typology for this theme is certainly found in the aforementioned tales of Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, Leah, and Sampson's unnamed mother.

Yet, even with his sympathy for those who experience infertility, and his respect for the role of the divine in conception, Chrysostom extrapolates advice from Hannah's exceptional experience for those who are infertile. He does acknowledge that childlessness affects rich and poor alike,[18] and he must have been well acquainted with the woes of married couples who had trouble conceiving (what pastor throughout the ages has not been?), yet he still seems surprisingly tone-deaf when giving advice about infertility. For example, he suggests that by familiarizing themselves with Hannah's story, "childless women will be able to learn how to become mothers."[19] He elaborates: "If you come to him [the priest] with these [tears, prayers, and faith], you will receive all that you ask, and will go off in complete happiness."[20] Chrysostom concludes that it is Hannah's faith and fervor that results in a son, and that a similar fervor on the part of an infertile woman could produce similar results. He is even suspicious of consulting a physician in matters of fertility and suggests that a woman is better off turning to prayer.[21] It could be that his enthusiasm for Hannah's triumph over infertility leads to overstatement. Or perhaps, as Robert Hill suggests, these homilies were given to an exclusively male audience, meaning that Chrysostom was not truly advising women on these matters;[22] in that case, perhaps he was more concerned with making a rhetorical point about prayerful dedication to the Lord than with being sensitive to the situation of infertility. A generous interpretation might posit that Chrysostom was speaking of metaphorical

[17] Ibid., 75, 79.
[18] Chrysostom, "Homily 5 on Hannah," *Old Testament Homilies*, 130.
[19] Chrysostom, "Homily 3 on Hannah," *Old Testament Homilies*, 97.
[20] Ibid., 99.
[21] Ibid., 99.
[22] Robert C. Hill, "Saint John Chrysostom's Homilies on Hannah," 328.

fruit and suggesting that all efforts of prayer are fruitful in some way, though not always in the way intended.

I dedicate time to examining Chrysostom's belief in divine intercession in matters of fertility because this belief is certainly not foreign to the Orthodox Church. In fact, the marriage rite itself is often jokingly referred to as the "Orthodox fertility rite" because the fecundity of the couple is mentioned about a dozen times, including in the passage already cited in this chapter. In addition to prayer in the marriage rite, Orthodoxy has a long tradition of miracle-working icons and relics that assist fertility. One such item commonly referred to today is a purported piece of a garment from the Birthgiver kept at the Vatopedi Monastery in the locus of male Orthodox monasticism: the peninsula full of monasteries in northern Greece called Mount Athos. Although, ironically, women are allowed neither at this monastery nor anywhere on Mount Athos, the monks there bless special ribbons near the relic and then send them all over the world to women who are praying for fertility. One website about Greek monasteries, though lacking a felicitous English translation, gives a taste of this sort of use of the relics:

> The grace-spurting Sash of the Mother of God, the holiest belonging of Vatopedi monastery, is the only arteface [sic] from the earthly life of Theotokos.
> According to the Holy Tradition of the Church, the Most Holy Theotokos resurrected and ascended in body to heaven three days after her Dormition. During her ascension, she gave her Honorable Sash to St. Apostle Thomas.
>
> Initially, the Sash was enshrined in Jerusalem and later in Constantinople, where in the 12th c. during Manuel I Comnenos' reign (1143–1180), its official celebration on August 31st was instituted. Finally, Emperor John VI Cantacuzenos (1347–1355), who greatly hold the monastery dear, donated the Honorable Sash to Vatopedi. Today, the Sash is kept in a silver shrine bearing the image of the monastery.

> The Honorable Sash has the exceptional grace to cure women's infertility and cancer with a ribbon previously blessed on the holy relic and then worn by the infertile women or patients.[23]

Equivalent traditions exist regarding icons purported to have healing properties specific to infertility.

As evidenced by the marriage rite and by the icon and relic traditions, Chrysostom's belief that the biological process of procreation alone does not make a new person is normative in Orthodoxy. Thus it follows that faithful prayer can and should play a role in infertility. Yet Chrysostom's implication that children will come to women if they just pray hard enough seems, for one thing, factually incorrect, and, for another, out of line with an Orthodox understanding of prayer. In Orthodoxy, prayer is typically relational rather than transactional. The contemporary Orthodox scholar Archimandrite Meletios Webber sums up this point as follows: "Typically in the Orthodox Church, we do not pray for specific outcomes, but simply make the act of remembering someone or something before God in prayer a gesture of love. 'Lord remember . . .' followed by a name or situation is quite sufficient."[24] There are prayers included in the Divine Liturgy for specific outcomes, such as the safety of travelers or the release of hostages, but these prayers are really intended as a "Lord, remember . . ." sort of formulation—a fact that is affirmed by the response to each of these petitions: "Lord have mercy," which constitutes its own sort of "Lord, remember. . . ."

Whether or not prayer for fertility results in a desired outcome, deep theological questions remain about the existence of infertility. Does it result from the brokenness of our world? Or, given God's involvement in the creation of a new person, must it be concluded that infertility is a

[23] "Mount Athos Vatopedi Monastery," *Monachthpia*, n.d., http://www.monastiria.gr/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=406&lang=en.
[24] Meletios Webber, *Bread & Water, Wine & Oil: An Orthodox Christian Experience of God* (Chesterton, IN: Conciliar Press, 2007), 56.

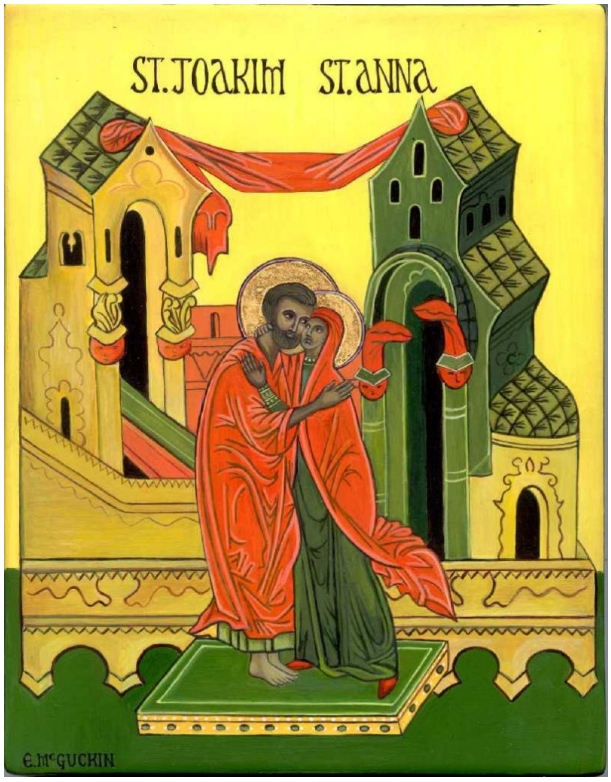
result of God's permission, though perhaps not God's will? What can be made of the fact that when children are conceived by methods generally frowned upon by the Orthodox Church, such as donor in vitro fertilization, God continues to support the formation of a new human person in those circumstances?[25] Chrysostom appears to suggest that God plays some sort of direct role in infertility in advising that if one encounters holy women who are childless, one should not speculate about their situation but should acknowledge that God is "knowing our situation more precisely than we ourselves."[26] Yet Hannah and Anna did not accept their childlessness; instead, they persisted fervently in asking God for a child. Thus ambiguity remains: How does a woman seeking a child know when to persist, as did Hannah and Anna, rather than accepting that God "knows us better than we know ourselves"?

Infertility is a matter of theodicy that cannot be confined within any neat theological cage. Even so, Chrysostom's reflections flirt too closely with the thinking that infertility is either deserved or forms some part of God's "plan" and that a woman can cure her own fertility if she just says the right prayer or sincerely prays enough. These are not Orthodox understandings of perceived misfortune or prayer. Rather, an Orthodox understanding includes appreciation of the fact that neither a child nor infertility is deserved. This understanding is illustrated beautifully in the great Norwegian historical epic, *Kristin Lavransdatter*. The eponymous character experiences a moment as a young Christian mother when the unwarranted wonder of motherhood hits her. She gazes down at her firstborn and reflects on how preposterously unfair it is that she, a flawed human, should have borne a creature of her own flesh that is "so pure, so healthy, so inexpressibly lovely. This undeserved beneficence broke her heart in two."[27] This literary example illustrates the

[25] Unlike the Catholic Church, Orthodoxy provides no official decrees on contraception or reproductive technology, but most Orthodox do not advocate for conceiving children outside of a woman's body from donor sperm or eggs.
[26] Chrysostom, "Homily 3 on Hannah," *Old Testament Homilies,* 101.
[27] Sigrid Undset, *Kristin Lavransdatter II: The Wife*, trans. Tinna Nunnally (New York, NY: Penguin Classics, 1999), 107.

Orthodox understanding of both fertility and infertility—that just as no mother deserves to have born to her such a wonderful creature of her own flesh, so also no woman who is unable to bear children deserves her fate.

Anna and Joachim's Icon



Saint Joakim and Saint Anna, twenty-first century, United States, Joanne McGuckin[28]

The icon type of Saint Joachim and Anna, also called the Conception of the Theotokos, offers an Orthodox view of marital sexual relations and conception. Just as Anna and Joachim are presented in the *Protoevangelium* as a married couple that is pleased at the prospect of sexual union, the same sentiment is conveyed in their icon as seen in the contemporary *Saint Joachim and Saint Anna* icon written by Eileen McGuckin. This icon type depicts the moment from the *Protoevangelium* when

[28] *Saint Joakim and Saint Anna*, Eileen McGuckin, n.d., http://www.sgtt.org/iconindex.html.

they have rushed to be together after each hearing from an angel that they will finally conceive a child. They are in such haste that their garments are aflutter, perhaps suggesting imminent removal. Their embrace is serious yet passionate: Anna looks into Joachim's eyes, and he returns her deep gaze. Their shared gaze is especially noteworthy since most icons depict saints looking either at the viewer or off to the side. Anna and Joachim's locked eyes indicate that this icon deals with the grace-filled relationship between two people. A stylized, platform bed—ready for use—is often conveniently positioned just behind them; in the example shown here, they are standing on it. Clearly, Joachim and Anna are eager to unite sexually in order to create the child that they have been promised.

No other icon so directly takes up the subject of sex. The explicit sexual ambiance, including the couple's eagerness, suggests a sacramental notion of marital sex. The sexual act is described by John Chryssavgis as "an event imparting saving grace and a pledge of a covenant relationship with the sacred order."[29] The creation of a new person by a mother and a father is shown to be a joyful event, possessing both spiritual and physical properties, that takes place in the context of marital love. In Orthodox thinking, sex is condoned, even celebrated, as a unitive act within marriage that bolsters the spiritual aspect of the "one flesh" partnership. As Vigen Guroian observes, "The first chapter of Genesis introduces the very first man and woman as one conjugal being, complementarities of one complete humanity. . . . [H]usband and wife are joined as *one* in holy matrimony. They are ecclesial unity, one flesh, one body incorporate of two persons who in freedom and sexual love and through their relationship to Christ image the triune life of the Godhead and express the great mystery of salvation in Christ's relationship to the Church."[30] Guroian's thinking reflects representations of the married couple as one conjugal being in Genesis

[29] John Chryssavgis, *Love, Sexuality, and the Sacrament of Marriage* (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2005), 9.
[30] Vigen Guroian, "An Ethic of Marriage and Family," in *Incarnate Love: Essays in Orthodox Ethics* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1987), 88.

(2:24), Ephesians (5:32), and the words of Jesus Christ (Matt. 19:5–6, Mark 10:8), and this notion of the conjugal being is well represented in the Joachim and Anna icon type.

Returning for a moment to Chrysostom's thought on family, he extends the notion of the ecclesial-unity in marriage to include the child: "How do they become one flesh? As if she were gold receiving the purest of gold, the woman receives the man's seed with rich pleasure, and within her it is nourished, cherished, and refined. It is mingled with her own substance and then she returns it as a child! The child is a bridge connecting mother to father, so the three become one flesh, as when two cities divided by a river are joined by a bridge. And here that bridge is formed from the substance of each!"[31] Chrysostom's understanding of the one flesh family and his insistence on the physical connection between parents and child—the bridge—honor both the physicality of the sexual union in marriage and the deep physicality of childbearing. These Orthodox intimations about the one-flesh union, illustrated so well in the tale and icon of Anna's conception of the Birthgiver, present a vision of a beginning of motherhood that embraces the physical aspect of conception—an affirmative beginning for a role that is inescapably physical. The conjugal being, and the one-flesh state of marriage, can be understood as the locus of motherhood in Orthodox thinking: Within marriage, in union with her husband, a woman begins her physical and spiritual motherhood.

I wrote in chapter 1 that although the Orthodox Church understands the human body as created in paradise and destined for eternity, the Church has never settled on an understanding of the repercussions of the Fall on the body (nor has it reckoned fully with the changes in the body wrought by the Incarnation and the Resurrection and the promised life in the world to come). Some theologians see the Fall as having created new "garments of skin," as making what had been a

[31] John Chrysostom, "Homily 12, On Colossians 4:18," in *On Marriage and Family Life*, Popular Patristics Series, trans. Catherine P. Ross and David Anderson (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Press, 1986), 76.

spiritualized sort of body into something fleshly, dense, and burdensome. Even in this understanding of the body—which appears to be a negative one—the story and icon of Anna demonstrate that in spite of whatever fleshly burden may have been received in the Fall, the body possesses its own grace in the context of sexuality in Christian marriage. This grace extends to the woman as she begins her journey to motherhood, and this esteem for the body trumps any understanding of such things that denigrates the physical being. Part of the grace in marital sexuality is the mother's openness, her hospitality, to share her own form with another human being.

Maternal Kinship: Freedom and Grace

Chrysostom's reflections on prayer and motherhood extend far beyond his reflections on infertility, and they include an understanding of maternal prayer as consecratory and formative. Furthermore, he introduces a distinction between bearing and raising children that points to the theological significance of the mother's free will in childbearing. This theme of free will and motherhood is joined with the concept of grace in the Annunciation story and icon. Taken together, these sources begin to illustrate how rightly ordered motherhood can be understood as a model for kinship between mother and child, which can extend to other relationships as well.

Chrysostom on Women and Mothers

The most extended meditation on motherhood and its virtues that I know of in the patristic writings is John Chrysostom's treatment of motherhood in his homilies on Hannah. His homilies are certainly not systematic theological treatises, but they are highly theological and influential. Their influence is a reminder that the theology of the Church is not exclusive to the theological treatise. Theology takes place in many forms, including councils, icons, hymns, and, especially germane to Chrysostom, homilies. Simply put, homilies are reflections offered orally by a parish

priest or bishop to his flock. Often based on a passage from scripture or a current feast day, they were sometimes written down in the early church, either by the homilist himself or by a listener. In the case of popular preachers, homilies were copied, distributed, and read in other churches. To this day, homilies composed in the early few centuries of the Church are read in Orthodox churches; for example, some Orthodox jurisdictions follow the tradition of reading the *Pascal Homily of Saint John Chrysostom* at the Pascal vigil. Chrysostom's homilies are particularly enduring, and his work on Hannah's prayer sets the scene for the contemplation of pre-conceptive prayer that orders the mother and child relationship even prior to conception.

Before getting to that work, however, I offer biographical details and address Chrysostom's reputation regarding women, including mothers, as well as his views on family. I address these topics partly in order to situate John Chrysostom in history and partly because I anticipate that his inclusion in this study may raise some eyebrows, given that he is known in some quarters as a hyperbolic misogynist. The same claim is sometimes made about other interlocutors engaged in this project, but this charge is often directed specifically at Chrysostom. I also include this discussion of Chrysostom's reputation because the manner in which I advocate approaching him can be understood to be indicative of my approach to other patristic thinkers.

Born in the middle of the fourth century in Antioch, John Chrysostom became a Christian as a young man and immediately desired to begin an ascetic life of semi-solitude in the mountain caves near the city. However, he delayed his departure for nine years in order to live with and care for his widowed mother,[32] a detail that should not be lost in an evaluation of his views on women and mothers. After her death, he became a devoted monastic and dedicated many of his earliest works to praising the life of consecrated virginity that he had chosen for himself with the

[32] David Ford, *Women and Men in the Early Church: The Full Views of St. John Chrysostom* (South Canaan, PA: St. Tikhon's Seminary Press, 1996), 3.

understanding that it was the superior Christian path. He was ordained to the priesthood in his thirties, became a distinguished preacher, which earned him the nickname Chrysostom ("the golden-mouthed"), and, at fifty, was ordained archbishop of Constantinople. During this last era of his life, he experienced ecclesial and political unrest and ultimately died in exile.

As noted, Chrysostom's reputation as a misogynist is not exclusive to him; rather, it extends to the whole cohort of Church fathers. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, for example, expresses her agreement with other feminist scholars by referring to this group as "the so-called [early Christian] Fathers, whose misogynism is widely acknowledged."[33] Chrysostom's misogynistic reputation is earned, at least to some extent, by passages from his homilies in which he is, at minimum, uncharitable to women—for example, when he counsels husbands on the misfortune of being married to an ugly wife[34] or labels women as vainglorious busybodies.[35] The list of charges against him might also include, as addressed earlier, his undiplomatic manner of addressing infertility. Skepticism about Chrysostom's validity as a theological source on women comes from within Orthodox circles as well. For example, Orthodox scholar Eva Catafygiotu Topping wrote that "to rationalize women's oppression in society and church, the fathers of Christianity developed a totally negative image of woman. This anti-woman theology received classic expression in the golden eloquence of St. John Chrysostom."[36]

Chrysostom's harshest comments about women are found in the writing and homilies that he produced as a young ascetic. He always valued consecrated virginity over marriage, but—

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[33] Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her* (New York: Crossroad, 1985), 106.
[34] Chrysostom, "Homily 20 on Ephesians 5:22-33,"*On Marriage and Family Life*, 48.
[35] John Chrysostom, "Homily 10 on I Timothy," *Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers*, First Series 1, vol. 13, trans. and ed. Philip Schaff, (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1889), rev. and ed. for New Advent by Kevin Knight, 2009, http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/230710.htm.
[36] Eva Catafygiotu Topping, *Holy Mothers of Orthodoxy* (Minneapolis, MN: Light and Life Publishing, 1987), 43. This assessment of the patristic theologians in general, and of Chrysostom in particular, is not the dominant one in contemporary Orthodox scholarship. More representative is Ford's *Women and Men in the Early Church*, which acknowledges Chrysostom's shortcomings, while embracing his wisdom.

whether due to age or to the changed demographics of his audience—he became less severe toward women and quite sympathetic to families, as bishop of Antioch and then archbishop of Constantinople. Even so, the homilies under review here are not free of negativity toward women. For example, Chrysostom offers Hannah the following backhanded compliment: "I admire her for her sound values, and I am more amazed that as a woman she had sound values—woman, whom many frequently criticize."[37] Yet Chrysostom developed deep personal relationships with particular women and regarded them as his spiritual equals.[38] In addition, he clearly regarded women and men as equal in their possibility for deification, if not always equal in strength or virtue in this life. He greatly admired the women of scripture and dedicated many homilies to Hannah and others. It is my conviction that any discussion of his views on women must take into account the broader culture of his day, the development of his thought over time, and, most important, the full range of his work—that is, not only the parade of examples of his negativity toward women but also the considerable attention that he gave to laudable women throughout his work.

An evaluation of Chrysostom's putative sexism must also take account of his high opinion of families in general and mothers in particular. Chrysostom certainly says more about family and parenthood than any other theologian or homilist from the ancient Christian world, and he expresses relatively glowing esteem for families and parents.[39] He speaks about teaching children to pray and read scripture, educating children, and identifying when children should be introduced to the concept of hell (no earlier than age 15). Granted, he often addresses his remarks to fathers as

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[37] Chrysostom, "Homily 4 on Hannah," *Old Testament Homilies*, 112.

[38] For a history of the relationship between John Chrysostom and his friend Deaconess Olympia, see Valerie Zahirsky, "Deaconess Olympia: A Sister in the Faith," in *Encountering Women of Faith*, vol. 1 (Berkeley, CA: InterOrthodox Press, 2005), 47–66.

[39] For a review of Chrysostom's thoughts on parenthood, see three essays by Vigen Guroian: "An Ethic of Marriage and Family," in *Incarnate Love: Essays in Orthodox Ethics* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1987), 79–116; "Family and Christian Virtue: Reflections on the Ecclesial Vision of John Chrysostom," in *Ethics After Christendom: Toward an Ecclesial Christian Ethic* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2004), 133–154; and "The Ecclesial Family: John Chrysostom on Parenthood and Children," in *The Child in Christian Thought,* ed. Marcia J. Bunge (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans), 2001, 61–77.

the principal directors of their children's education and religious upbringing. But in some places, and especially in his homilies on Hannah, he explicitly notes that some of what he is saying extends to mothers as well.[40] Moreover, he also addresses some of his remarks directly to mothers, and not so much in pragmatic or didactic terms but in spiritual terms.

As Orthodox historian David Ford observes, Chrysostom located holiness in the domain of women: "Concerning the role of women in society, Chrysostom shared his culture's general feeling that women's principal roles were the very valuable ones of managing household affairs, and of bearing and raising children. But he raised these things to a higher level, charging them with spiritual power and importance."[41] Certainly, then, he did not hold a "totally negative image of woman" or an "anti-woman theology." This quick review of Chrysostom's views on women and mothers reveals an imperfect human being, certainly, but one with a real interest in and respect for these topics. On this basis—as well as his sainthood in the Orthodox Church—I consider his work on family and women as an extraordinary gift from the Christian past to the Christian present. More specifically, Chrysostom's musings on motherhood contribute to an Orthodox theology of motherhood with respect to both maternal prayer and the mother's embracing of her role in freedom.

Hannah's Prayer

It is in his homilies on Hannah that Chrysostom meditates on motherhood the most.[42] In this examination of parts of these homilies, I first situate Hannah's tale of motherhood, then offer

[40] Chrysostom also clearly states that his advice on mothering, fathering, and parenting applies to both male and female children: "Let not the women, therefore, consider it beyond them to care for both the girls and the boys. Gender makes no difference in these instances" ("Homily 1 on Hannah," *Old Testament Homilies*, 73).
[41] David Ford, *Women and Men in the Early Church: The Full Views of St. John Chrysostom*, 45.
[42] Leading up to Pentecost in the year AD 387 in Antioch, Chrysostom delivered five homilies structured loosely on the topic of the mother of the prophet Samuel. Like many of Chrysostom's homilies, these five are impressively discursive, but they circle around one theme—prayer—selected in the wake of an unusually prayerful Lent. In February 387,

Chrysostom's overarching views on motherhood, followed by his reflections on motherhood inspired by Hannah, especially in respect to her prayer.

The locus of Chrysostom's reflections on motherhood is Hannah's story from the first two chapters of the Old Testament (sixth-century BC) book of I Kingdoms (I Samuel).[43] Hannah is one of two wives of Elkanah, and, unlike the other wife, she does not have children. She grieves this misfortune and is taunted by the other wife. On one of her yearly trips to the temple, Hannah is moved to pray: "O Lord, my God of Sabaoth, if you are looking, look with favor upon the lowly state of your handmaiden and remember me. I pray you, give your handmaiden a seed of men, a son, and I will dedicate him before You as a gift until the day of his death" (I Kgdms. 1:11 SAAS). At first, the priest, Eli, does not receive Hannah's prayer on good faith, and he even accuses her of being drunk; then, however, he affirms her petition with these words: "Go in peace and may the God of Israel grant you the petition you asked of Him" (I Kgdms. 1:17 SAAS). In due course, Hannah conceives and bears a son, the prophet Samuel, whom she raises in the manner she had promised in her prayer—as a gift to the Lord.

In the words of Chrysostom scholar Robert C. Hill, "Chrysostom is not composing a manifesto for womankind"[44] in these homilies on Hannah. Nonetheless, Chrysostom is inspired by Hannah to focus on the spiritual import of motherhood, and he characterizes mothering primarily as an occasion for salvation for the mother. Directing his remarks at mothers, he says, "I mean, the

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citizens of Antioch rioted against the emperor, and they were anticipating punishment while they waited for a delegate from Antioch to petition the emperor on their behalf. During this period of limbo, which coincided with Great Lent, the time of preparation before Pascha (Easter), John Chrysostom led the Christians of Antioch through a deeply penitential, repentant, and prayerful vigil that lasted for weeks and concluded when the delegate returned to Antioch to announce the emperor's mercy. The citizens of Antioch rejoiced, and their preacher continued to speak of the great efficacy of prayer, using Hannah as an example of sincere and realized prayer. For a fuller description of this history, see Ford, *Women and Men in the Early Church*, 3–5.

[43] I Kingdoms is the book designation offered in the Septuagint, which would have been the text known to Chrysostom. In the Septuagint, I and II Kingdoms make up what is elsewhere known as I and II Samuel, and III and IV Kingdoms cover what is elsewhere known as I and II Kingdoms.

[44] Robert C. Hill. "Saint John Chrysostom's Homilies on Hannah," *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 45, no. 4 (2001): 329.

children being born, provided they receive proper care and are brought up to virtue by your attention, prove a basis and occasion of complete salvation for you; and in addition to your own virtuous acts you will receive a great reward for your care of them."[45] Thus Chrysostom sees motherhood as a salvific opportunity, as a vocation that can lead to the heavenly reward.

Chrysostom is also interested in the intensity and focus of Hannah's prayer, and he considers these two qualities as providing a model for all prayer—maternal or otherwise. He is smitten with the spontaneity, ardency, and physicality of her prayer: "Instead of saying anything at first, she began with wailing, and shed warm floods of tears. And just as, when rain storms fall, even the harder ground is moistened and softened, and easily bestirs itself to produce crops, so too did this happen in the case of this woman: as though softened by the flood of tears and warmed by the pangs, the womb began to stir in that wonderful fertility."[46] Spontaneous prayer is, according to twentieth-century Orthodox theologian and Metropolitan Anthony Bloom, "the kind of prayer that gushes out of our souls."[47] It is the experience of spontaneous prayer—in this case, the spontaneous, pre-conceptive prayer of Hannah that "gushes out of her soul"—that draws Chrysostom's attention.

In extolling the focus and intentionality of Hannah's spontaneous prayer, Chrysostom contrasts it with more typical, less mindful prayer: "I mean, while we all pray, we do not all do it before the Lord: when the body is lying on the ground and the mouth is babbling on, and the mind wandering through all parts of the house and the market place, how will such people be in a position to claim that they prayed before the Lord?"[48] In short, Hannah embodies the character of

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[45] Chrysostom, "Homily 1 on Hannah," *Old Testament Homilies*, 73.
[46] Ibid., 77. Despite Chrysostom's interest in Hannah's power of prayer, he does not mention her Magnificat. Even so, it is a treasured passage in the Orthodox Church, not only forming the basis for Mary's Magnificat in Luke 1:46–55 but also excerpted in the Matins service and in many church hymns.
[47] Anthony Bloom, *Beginning to Pray* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1970), 55.
[48] Chrysostom, "Homily 2 on Hannah," *Old Testament Homilies*, 85. In reference to the priest's asking if she has been drinking (I Kingdoms 1:13), Chrysostom calls her "drunk from deep piety" (in "Homily 2 on Hannah," 94). Hannah was

prayer that Chrysostom appreciates. Most prayer is half-hearted, barely present, whereas Hannah's prayer is fully present, felt in her body and her soul. In this way, Hannah provides the model for all types of prayer.

Chrysostom praises Hannah's example of hearty, proper prayer as something to be emulated by all people, but he sees a special role for prayer by mothers. His instruction to mothers is to "consecrate your son"[49] through prayer. Because Chrysostom's discussion of motherhood revolves specifically around Hannah and her firstborn, his terminology for children is masculine: "consecrate your son." For the purpose of this study, I apply Chrysostom's intimations for Christian motherhood to the mothering of both sons and daughters. Whether a female or male child, the responsibility of a mother in prayer for her child is to bless the child and make him or her holy.

Chrysostom continues by noting that Hannah "took [Samuel] up to a temple; in your case make yourself a royal temple. Scripture says, remember, 'Your members are Christ's body and the temple of the Holy Spirit within you.'"[50] As Chrysostom continues to describe this relationship of mother and child and God, it takes on an ecclesial character in the sense that the family is a little church, in which the parents shoulder priestly obligations. As Vigen Guroian writes, in his study of Chrysostom's homilies on family, "Chrysostom assigns to parents a sacred responsibility for the religious and moral formation of their offspring."[51] The statement is accurate, but Chrysostom also goes beyond this sentiment in his contemplation of motherhood, in which he posits a sacred relationship between mother and child—and God—that is established by the mother's consecration

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also the model for all prayer in the rabbinic tradition; see Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *Motherprayer: A Pregnant Woman's Spiritual Companion* (NY: Riverhead Books, 1995), 9–11.

[49] Chrysostom, "Homily 3 on Hannah," *Old Testament Homilies*, 104.

[50] Ibid., 104.

[51] Guroian, "The Ecclesial Family," *The Child in Christian Thought*, 69.

of the child. This consecration, for Chrysostom, can be enacted before birth; he characterizes the child in the womb as a "living offering."[52]

Chrysostom sees this sacred relationship as important for rightly ordered conception. In the case of Hannah, he is so appreciative of her spontaneous, heartfelt prayer and her capacity for this ecclesial relationship that he says:

> You all heard how she prayed, how she begged, pleaded and received her request, conceived, bore, and made an offering of Samuel. And so anyone would not be wide of the mark in calling this woman the child's mother and father at the same time: even if the husband sowed the seed, *her prayer* supplied the potency to the seed and rendered the beginnings of Samuel's birth more august. After all, it was really not only the parents' sleeping together and having intercourse, as in other cases; rather, prayers, tears and faith formed the beginnings of this birth, and the prophet had more august parents than other children, having come into being as a result of his mother's faith. [53]

Hannah's child, then, is *formed by her prayer*; that is, her prayer played a role in the formation of his very being. Chrysostom extends his observations on Hannah to other mothers, suggesting that they, too, situate conception within prayer and allow their prayer to spiritually form and shape their children.

Chrysostom's thoughts about the role of prayer in the formation of a child epitomize the rightly ordered beginning of the mother-child kinship. He asserts that children are formed by prayer and that a mother can consecrate her children through prayer before they are born. As noted earlier, prayer in Orthodoxy is considered to be relational; that is, it connects person and God together in conversation. This model of prayer for mothers adds another party to this relationship: a child. Thus mother, child, and God are bound together in the mother's prayerful consecration of the child. This beautiful trinity of persons in kinship is a model not only for mothers, but also for fathers and indeed for all people. Although the mother's connection with her unborn child is

[52] Chrysostom, "Homily 1 on Hannah," *Old Testament Homilies*, 79.
[53] Chrysostom, "Homily 2 on Hannah," *Old Testament Homilies*, 82.

unique and might offer specific formative possibilities according to Chrysostom, this ability to bring three into prayer is not confined to biological motherhood; it can be enacted by any mother at any time.

Motherhood and Freedom

Saint John Chrysostom's homilies include another gem that illumines Christian kinship between mothers and children—specifically, his notion that free will plays an important role in motherhood. Here I discuss this notion and then use it to explore a richer understanding of how free will and grace can act in concert in motherhood, a reality that is well illustrated by the Annunciation story and icon.

Chrysostom, of course, wrote about the relationship between motherhood and free will in the fourth century, but concepts of free will or choice also circulate in contemporary discourse about motherhood. However, twenty-first century motherhood in the developed world differs in important ways from motherhood in Chrysostom's time. Indeed, for most of the Christian era, including Chrysostom's period, a woman was more or less defined by motherhood: as a mother, a potential mother, a woman who failed to be a mother, or a woman who took the only honorable path away from motherhood—the vow of consecrated virginity. In contrast, in many parts of the world today, motherhood is no longer exclusively a fate, or a failure, of women. Perceptions of women and motherhood have changed, and questions of when and how women become mothers have been radically altered by contraception and abortion, as well as changes in social conventions and expectations regarding the timing of childbearing. Whereas it might once have often been the case that a woman first married and then had children whenever her conjugal union with her husband resulted in them, many women in the contemporary developed world precisely dictate the timing and number of their pregnancies and thus decide when they are ready to begin childbearing.

The ability to control one's own reproduction means that these women now usually make deliberate decisions about becoming a mother—or not becoming a mother—and they sometimes do so regardless of marital status.

In fact, the timing of motherhood can be controlled even within normative Orthodox understandings of family and motherhood. Although the Orthodox Church takes no official stance on contraception, many priests counsel engaged couples that the use of contraception is welcome in some circumstances, as noted in chapter 1. At the same time, as also reviewed in chapter 1, normative Orthodox teachings about family include a strong expectation that a woman who is a wife will become a mother. Indeed, Orthodox women who are married are clearly expected to have children, and some commenters, such as John Meyendorff, expect the woman to feel an "immediate and impatient desire . . . to receive and share in this joy."[54] In an Orthodox context, the conviction that marriage should—unless barred by illness or exceptional circumstance—lead to childbearing is a logical one, given the Orthodox understanding of creation and marriage. Yet, this conviction does not confine womanhood to the fate or failure of motherhood, nor does it promote motherhood as womanhood's defining characteristic, nor does it preclude use of contraception to space pregnancies.

Normative understandings can breed nominal outcomes, meaning in this case that a vision of marriage that includes motherhood could lead to a perfunctory understanding of motherhood as something merely conditioned by marital status or church obligation. However, Chrysostom counters a nominalist view of motherhood in his homilies and distinguishes between the bearing and the raising of children in ways that illuminate a woman's agency in the act of mothering.

Motherhood as Raising Children

[54] Meyendorff, *Marriage: An Orthodox Perspective*, 59.

Chrysostom states outright the distinction between bearing and raising children: "It is not the bearing of children that makes a mother."[55] More specifically, he contrasts bearing and raising in this way: "One thing comes from nature, the other from free will."[56] All of his remarks on motherhood that follow are based on the idea that motherhood is an enterprise of the free and unconstrained will; it does not just happen, but instead it is *chosen*. That is, a woman can be involved in the biological production of children without genuinely assuming the office of mother; in contrast, truly being a mother in Chrysostom's sense involves deliberately choosing to do so.

For Chrysostom, this distinction is not ultimately about a woman's ability to bear a child and then choose not to mother that child. Rather, he is driven by the recognition that caring for a child by merely going through the motions differs from truly *raising* the child by choosing to embrace one's role as mother. Therefore, whereas one might assign motherhood the basic working definition of "giving birth to a child," Chrysostom rejects that definition and instead proposes that motherhood be understood as "choosing to raise a child."

Childbirth alone does not make one a true mother. As Chrysostom states, "free will is more influential than nature, and it is the former rather than the latter that normally constitutes both children and parents."[57] Authentic motherhood, then, is not conferred by biology alone but is accepted and chosen. This is also true of fatherhood, but perhaps Chrysostom goes out of his way to state its truth for motherhood; indeed, given the disproportionately physical reality of childbearing for women, it may be necessary to emphasize that the conception, pregnancy, and birthgiving of a child are not determinative of motherhood. Although Chrysostom does not speak directly to any tradition of adoption in the ancient world, one logical extension of his thinking is that a woman does not have to bear children in a biological sense in order to be a mother. One can choose to

[55] Chrysostom, "Homily 1 on Hannah," *Old Testament Homilies*, 73.
[56] Ibid., 73.
[57] Ibid., 71–72.

mother the children that come into one's care, whether through adoption or fostering, or by mothering stepchildren.

The view of motherhood as an act of free will carries powerful implications for a theological understanding of motherhood. For one thing, it prevents a view of motherhood as a role that can be carried out mechanically based on the expectation that all married women, barring exceptional circumstances, will become mothers. Yet Chrysostom's understanding of motherhood as chosen does more than just avert a rote understanding of the tasks of motherhood. It also frames motherhood as an office to which one may be called—and one that requires a reciprocal acceptance enacted not in a vacuum, but in kinship. The mother, when choosing to *raise* her child, turns to her or him again and again, deliberately reconstituting the kinship between herself and her child.

Mothering in Freedom and Grace

Thus far, based on Chrysostom's comments, this discussion has centered on free will alone. Is time now to consider how free will and grace act in concert in motherhood. To this end, I now examine the interchange between the Birthgiver's own free will and God's grace in her conception of her son in order to explore how they complement Chrysostom's statements and further develop an Orthodox theology of motherhood.

In talking about the importance of grace and free will for an Orthodox theology of motherhood, it is necessary to first define terms and appreciate how they relate to each other in Orthodox thinking. Grace can be understood as follows, in the words of contemporary Orthodox theologian and Metropolitan Kallistos Ware: "not just a 'gift of God,' not just an object which God bestows upon humans, but a direct manifestation of the living God Himself, a personal encounter

between Creature and Creator."[58] Similarly, in the words of twentieth-century Orthodox theologian Vladimir Lossky, "Grace signifies all the abundance of the divine nature, in so far as it is communicated to men."[59] As for free will, thus far in this project it has been described as unconstrained choice—as the unfettered freedom of a person to choose how she moves through the world, whether in respect to motherhood or otherwise. But the isolation of free will in this way earlier in this chapter was somewhat disingenuous, because Orthodox tradition understands grace and free will as necessarily relating to each other; indeed, one does not operate without the other. More specifically, Orthodoxy rejects any notion of free will that precludes human interaction with the divine through grace, just as it rejects any concept of grace that undermines free will. Instead, grace and free will exist in relationship between the human and the divine. As Ware notes, "To describe the relation between the grace of God and human freedom, Orthodoxy uses the term co-operation or synergy; in Paul's words: 'We are fellow-workers with God' (I Corinthians 3:9)."[60]

Nowhere is the notion of being fellow-workers with God more readily apparent than in the Annunciation, where the Birthgiver of God serves as the principal template for mothering in both freedom and grace. Her free acceptance of the endeavor of raising her child and her grace-imbued maternity are vividly illustrated in prototypical Annunciation icons, including the fourteenth-century Macedonian *Annunciation* presented here. [61] Of all the Marian icons types, the Annunciation is among the most ancient; one found in the Priscilla Catacombs probably dates from the second century, and Annunciation icons were commonly included on pieces of jewelry and ampullae as

[58] Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church* (London, England: Penguin, 1993), 68.
[59] Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1976), 162.
[60] Ware, *The Orthodox Church,* 221.
[61] A less typical Annunciation icon is discussed in chapter 3.

early as the third and fourth centuries.[62] In addition, the feast of the Annunciation was added to the liturgical calendar in the sixth century, making it one of the earliest designated feasts of the Birthgiver.

Ohrid Annunciation, fourteenth-century, Macedonia[63]

Examining a typical Annunciation icon illuminates the cooperation between the human and the divine that takes place in the Annunciation. An Annunciation icon depicts the encounter between the Birthgiver and the angel Gabriel related in Luke 1:26–38. The Birthgiver and Gabriel

[62] Ampullae, made in Palestine, were small flasks used for holy oil in the early centuries of the Church. A few such items survive and are preserved at the Monza Church in Milan, Italy; they are referred to as the Monza Ampullae.
[63] *Ohrid Annunciation*, Macedonia, April 18, 2009, http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ohrid_annunciation_icon.jpg.

are directly engaged with each other in these icons, which is unusual in the corpus of iconography, as noted about the Joachim and Anna icon earlier.[64] In an Annunciation icon, the Birthgiver is encountering God even though Gabriel is the messenger. A relationship is forming, as is indicated by the appearance of a dove representing the Holy Spirit.

An Annunciation icon conveys action and movement in a way that few other icons do. Most other festal icons look more like still portraiture; even though they record events of action, they are composed in a static, posed format. In contrast, an Annunciation icon is more like a snapshot of the action. In the example reproduced here, Gabriel's robes billow, his feet have barely touched the ground, his wings are askew, he reaches toward the Birthgiver as he approaches her, the dove of the Holy Spirit descends, and the Birthgiver greets Gabriel with an air of wonder but also with confidence; her posture and bearing are sure.

The movement and change evoked in the icon are echoed in the hymnography for the feast: "Today is the beginning of our salvation and the revelation of the Eternal Mystery."[65] Thus the feeling of flux and flow is appropriate for this icon, both because the whole of human history began to change on this day and because the icon bears witness to the cooperation between human free will and divine grace. The Birthgiver raises her hand in a confident sign of assent. Orthodox theologian and iconographer Leonid Ouspensky, who writes so eloquently about icons and theology, notes that the movement in the icon emphasizes that "the Mother of God's consent is not a passive acceptance of the Annunciation, but an active surrender of Herself to God's will, a voluntary and independent participation of the Mother of God, and, in Her Person, all creatures, in

[64] The other instances of icon types depicting personal encounter also involve situations having to do with motherhood: the conception of John the Baptist and the presentation in the temple of the Birthgiver and of Jesus Christ.
[65] "Troparian of the Annunciation," Selected Liturgical Hymns of the Orthodox Church in America, 2015, http://oca.org/orthodoxy/prayers/selected-liturgical-hymns.

the work of Salvation."[66] Twentieth-century Orthodox theologian Elisabeth Behr-Sigel echoes this sentiment when she affirms that "the hymnography of the Annunciation . . . insists on Mary's agreement as an indispensible condition of the incarnation. Because of her faith, Mary becomes God's first co-worker."[67] The Birthgiver, through her own humanness, bridges between the human and the divine.

This moment of freedom, this affirmative response by the Birthgiver, reopens the passage to heaven. As Jaroslav Pelikan observes, "An obedience that is open to the future should be defined as supreme activity, not passivity."[68] Thus the dynamism depicted in the Annunciation icon type represents the dynamism in the Birthgiver's free acceptance of God's grace in the form of the Incarnation and her own motherhood; furthermore, it indicates the dynamic cooperation that is possible between humanity and God. The Birthgiver, like all mothers, opens herself up in an act of hospitality.

The Birthgiver's capacity to choose, in freedom, to become the Mother of God is upheld by the Orthodox view of the Fall and of sin. Orthodox theological anthropology holds, for the most part, an Irenaean view of the original creation of humans in the Garden of Eden—essentially, the idea found in the second-century patristic thinker Irenaeus that the first humans were childlike and were intended to mature and grow wise in grace in the Garden.[69] This view necessarily has consequences for the Orthodox understanding of sin generated by the Fall. As Kallistos Ware

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[66] Vladimir Lossky and Leonid Ouspensky, *The Meaning of Icons*, 2nd ed. (Crestwood, NY: Saint Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1999), 173.

[67] Elisabeth Behr-Sigel, *The Ministry of Women in the Church*, trans. Fr. Steven Bingham (Redondo Beach, CA: Oakwood Publications, 1991), 194.

[68] Jaroslav Pelikan, *Mary Through the Centuries: Her Place in the History of Culture* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998), 84.

[69] Irenaeus describes Adam and Eve as children who prematurely ate from the tree, which they were ultimately intended to eat once they had matured. See Irenaeus, "Against the Heresies," book 4, section 5 in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1. trans. Alexander Roberts and William Rambaut, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1885) rev. and ed. for New Advent by Kevin Knight, http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0103.htm. Though this view is, in my opinion the dominant view of the Fall in the Christian East, it was—and is—not the only one.

explains, "Orthodoxy, holding as it does a less exalted idea of the human state before the fall, is also less severe than the west in its view of the consequences of the fall. Adam fell not from a great height of perfection, but from a state of undeveloped simplicity."[70] The state of fallenness in which humanity resides is understood to be a communal state in which humanity, linked together, is estranged from God; therefore, again in Ware's words, "the consequences of Adam's disobedience extended to all his descendants. We are all members of one another, as St. Paul never ceased to insist, and if one member suffers the whole body suffers."[71]

So, rather than causing a stain on humanity, sin brings about a shared separation from God as a result of the Fall. And rather than a vision of sexuality indelibly tainted by original sin which is passed on from parent to child, Orthodox Christianity perceives no automatic stain generated and transmitted to a newly conceived person. Because Orthodoxy posits no "original sin" as an inheritance of guilt and no stain—sexual or otherwise—it is clear that the Birthgiver is not tainted with original sin at her parents' conception of her. In traditions that do hold that the Birthgiver was potentially an inheritor of original sin, the Birthgiver is understood therefore as immaculately conceived; as conceived in such a special way that she alone among humans is immune from original sin.

Within the Orthodox understanding, she is fully human, not exceptionalized in this way, complete with her own free will and temptation to sin. This is an important point in Mariological studies that bears directly on the understanding of the Birthgiver's freedom presented in this study. As the twentieth-century North American Saint John Maximovitch of San Francisco writes, "If She, without any effort [as in some Western Christian understandings], and without having any kind of impulses to sin, remained pure, then why is She crowned more than everyone else? There is no

[70] Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, 223.
[71] Ibid.

victory without an adversary."[72] Through her own freedom and with the grace of God, the Birthgiver chose the path of holiness again and again, and that choosing led her to the Annunciation, where she exercised her freedom and witnessed to God's grace. For Orthodox, then, the Birthgiver's obedient assent to the Annunciation is, in fact, the "signature of [her] freedom."[73] Her freedom also unleashed powerful consequences, setting into motion the Incarnation and ultimately the Resurrection. As Vladimir Lossky observes, "The answer of Mary to the Archangel's annunciation . . . resolves the tragedy of fallen humanity. All that God required of human liberty since the Fall is accomplished. And now the work of redemption, which only the Incarnate Word can effect, may take place."[74]

Thus the Birthgiver is the model of the free, virtuous, and grace-filled choice of motherhood. Her example is meaningful to a theology of motherhood because she exemplifies the relationship between human freedom and God's grace that is involved in every conception. This mix of free will and grace is what I refer to in describing the mother-child relationship in its ideal form as "rightly ordered." However, though the marriage of freedom and grace can be beautifully located at conception, it is not confined to that point in time. Even though an Annunciation icon depicts one moment, the Mother of God's freedom to mother is not static, nor is any other mother's. Instead, to mother in freedom is to continue to choose to—with the grace of God—(in Chrysostom's terms) raise children rather than just bear them, and to continually reconstitute the

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[72] John Maximovitch, *The Orthodox Veneration of Mary the Birthgiver of God* (Platina, CA: The Orthodox Brotherhood of Saint Herman, 1978), 59.

[73] Vigen Guroian, *Melody of Faith: Theology in an Orthodox Key* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 76. As Guroian points out, not all modern interpreters warm to this understanding: "There will be those who object even to this way of putting things. Mary's circumstance alone, they might argue, puts her in a subservient position. God and Mary are not equals, and God does the proposing, not she." In contrast, Guroian articulates the ancient Orthodox understanding: "The true end of human freedom is voluntary self-limitation in loving service to others and to God. God holds to this law of love when he condescends to become one of us. Mary is the first human being to obey this command wholly and consummately" (77–78).

[74] Vladimir Lossky, *In the Image and Likeness of God*, trans. various (Crestwood: NY, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1974), 202.

kinship between mother and child. Doing so involves turning with maternal love and commitment—over and over again, in freedom and with the grace of God—to, in Kristin Lavransdatter's formulation, this "undeserved beneficence." Indeed, the Birthgiver's consent invites all humans to model her maternity, to dynamically and repeatedly open themselves to the indwelling of God.

Conclusions and Possibilities

Orthodoxy's esteem for conjugality sets up an affirmative beginning for motherhood. More specifically, understanding the married couple as a "conjugal being," united physically and spiritually, lays the foundation for theological understanding of the physicality of the ensuing aspects of motherhood—pregnancy, birthgiving, and the postpartum time. This foundation is significant because it counteracts any impulse toward a splintered understanding of the human person that would divorce soul from body and diminish the latter. In contrast, this more liberating view of the maternal body celebrates the essential, beautiful, and true union of body and spirit. There is no better way to begin the path to motherhood, a path that very much involves the body. Indeed, a view of motherhood that embraces its physicality bolsters the Orthodox understanding of the significance of the human body—and not just for mothers.

John Chrysostom offers a helpful understanding of motherhood as *raising* children, as well as an appreciation of the power of prayer to frame a woman's experience of conception and motherhood and to sanctify her child. The Annunciation icon type complements and completes John Chrysostom's understanding of motherhood by illustrating the Orthodox understanding of freedom and grace in relation to each other and thus illuminating the manner in which mothers—and all humans—are called to move in freedom to align themselves with God's grace. This movement consists in part of a rightly ordered relationship, both between mother and child and

between mother and God. As Chrysostom observes, our manner of birth has a reason: "For why do we not all spring out of the earth? Why are we not created full-grown, as [Adam] was? In order that both the birth and the bringings up of children, and the being born of another, might bind us mutually together."[75] This notion of Chrysostom's—that "the being born from another person might bind us mutually together"—represents the intuition in Orthodoxy that the mother-child kinship provides a model for how all humans might relate to each other and that, ideally, the bond in freedom and love between mother and child would be replicated in certain ways in other relationships.

Other than the Church rites having to do with a newly born child (encountered in chapter 5), very few traditional composed prayers relating to motherhood are available for Orthodox women; including those seeking to conceive. A review of common Orthodox prayer books finds a few prayers for the safety and spiritual health of one's (already born) child but no prayers for conception. Similarly, a sampling of online sources turns up a small handful of prayers for Orthodox women to use during pregnancy, but nothing in anticipation of pregnancy or in hope of conception, other than the aforementioned relic traditions relating to infertility. In contrast, the Catholic Christian community has several prayer traditions addressing conception. A representative prayer is found in a manual for young women seeking to conceive:

> Mother of Christ, you know, as no other mother can, the dignity of motherhood. You know how immensely great is the privilege to call into this world a tiny soul destined to praise God forever in heaven. This is the privilege I now seek, Mary![76]

[75] John Chrysostom, "Homily XXXIV on I Corinthians," trans. Talbot W. Chambers, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers,* vol. 12, p. 204, ed. Philip Schaff (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1889) rev. and ed. for New Advent by Kevin Knight, 2009, http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/220134.htm.
[76] Frymer-Kensky, *Motherprayer*, 7.

Thus here is another lacuna having to do with motherhood in the Orthodox Church: a common Orthodox prayer book includes a blessing for beehives, but not for a woman who wishes to conceive. This absence deserves pastoral attention and care. Prayers about fertility might be included in general prayer books, and specific prayer books might be created for families and their particular needs. Such efforts might also address the need for prayer in cases of infertility. Writing centuries ago, Chrysostom recommended that women approach conception with prayer, and women today deserve to be better assisted in doing so.

Though the Orthodox Church lacks composed prayer for the lips of the mother, and though the addition of such prayers would be welcome, Hannah's and Anna's tales demonstrate that mothers have taken prayers for conception into their own hands for millennia—and that the Church has celebrated this initiative. These women have composed their own prayers and spoken them with their own lips; they have freely chosen their prayerful path to motherhood. This long tradition of spontaneous maternal prayer illumines the Orthodox Church's affirmation of women's power to embrace this domain of maternal prayer as their own. Indeed, in a fully realized vision of motherhood, every soul would be shaped in part by his or her mother's prayers for conception, every woman would understand her partnership with her husband as a conjugal union in both body and spirit, and mothers and children would enter into and pursue their kinship in freedom and grace.

Chapter 3: Pregnancy

Introduction

Soon after a new life is conceived, a mother begins to experience the changes that come with pregnancy. "Pregnancy is an intensification of life itself, and all the many experiences of the Holy in human life are sharpened and condensed into the short months in which we engage the future within ourselves,"[1] writes Tikva Frymer-Kensky. This "intensification of life" includes inescapable and rapid physical changes—the mother's expanding girth, her increased blood supply, her breasts preparing to produce food for her child—all of which happen in conjunction with emotional and spiritual changes.

Pregnancy also marks the beginning of maternal ascesis, the ascetical effort of motherhood. As part of this effort, a woman's energy level is compromised, and her ability merely to rise swiftly from a chair is challenged—all for the sake of harboring new life. These challenges mark the beginning of the self-sacrifice that is integral to motherhood and, more generally, to parenthood. As Frymer-Kensky observes, "parenting is a continual act of consideration for the child, and parents routinely perform such acts of self-denial and altruism that, were they performed for any but their own children, would easily qualify them as the sainted righteous of the world."[2] In the case of the mother, the physical aspect of consideration for the child begins many months earlier than for the father, as her changing body makes new demands on her.

Such demands were quite present during my triplet pregnancy. In an effort to maximize the length of gestation and increase the chances of high birth weights for the babies, I set out to gain eighty-five pounds. As the pregnancy went on longer and longer—which pleased me because it

[1] Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *Motherprayer* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1995), xxvi.
[2] Ibid., 38.

gave the babies a better chance of being born healthy—my health problems multiplied, ultimately including severe edema, insomnia, gestational diabetes, and cholestasis (a liver problem presenting in its early stages as extreme itching from head to toe). I was never officially put on bed rest but did essentially experience "couch rest" in the final months of the pregnancy; indeed, I was so big that it was hard to move. In my pain and discomfort, my relief was prayer. My pregnancy prompted the richest prayer life I have ever experienced—the Holy was present and, in Frymer-Kensky's phrase, was certainly "sharpened and condensed" for me during that pregnancy.

The Orthodox Church reflects this "sharpened and condensed" nature of pregnancy by showing great reverence in many sources for both pregnancy and pregnant women. Scripture includes many references to pregnancy, including the repeated affirmation that God, as both fashioner and lover of all humans, intimately knows each person in the womb. Here, for instance, is a passage from the Psalms, which are chanted in a weekly rotation in Orthodox monasteries and in some churches and excerpted in many services:

> For you possess my heart, O Lord; You took hold of me from my mother's womb.
> I will give thanks to You, For I am fearfully and wondrously made; marvelous are your works, And my soul knows them very well.
> My bone you made in secret was not hidden from You. And my substance was in the lowest part of the earth; Your eyes saw me when I was unformed,
> And all men shall be written in Your book; they shall be formed day by day, when as yet there were none among them. (Ps. 138[139]:13–16 SAAS)

In addition, one recurring theme in Orthodox hymns involves contemplation of the wonder of the Birthgiver's pregnancy with Christ. One hymn from fourth-century theologian-poet Ephrem the Syrian acknowledges Christ's embryonic state, as well as his role in the formation of other babies: "While His body was being formed, His power was constructing all the members. While the fetus of the Son was being formed in the womb, He Himself was forming babes in the

womb."[3] In these words, the Church acknowledges and celebrates the fact that Christ experienced an authentic, visceral pregnancy—that God was in the womb.

Hagiographies of saints also abound with tales of their unborn piety even before their birth, such as this one about fourteenth-century Russian Saint Sergius of Radonezh: "When his pious mother attended the Divine Liturgy [the Eucharistic service of the Orthodox Church] one Sunday as usual, the child in her womb suddenly projected his voice outside of his mother's womb and said three times: at the reading of the Gospel, at the beginning of the so-called Cherubic Hymn when the priest took the gifts to the altar, and, a third time, when the celebrant invited the faithful to communion with the exclamation: 'The Holy Things are for the Holy!'"[4] No matter how implausible this tale may sound, it expresses the Orthodox appreciation for the unborn child as fully human and capable of encountering God.

In addition to these many acknowledgements of pregnancy in scripture, song, and tradition, numerous representations of motherhood are found in iconography, including depictions of the Birthgiver's pregnancy with Jesus Christ. As the eighth-century Saint John of Damascus writes, "show me the images that you venerate, and I will show you what you believe."[5] With this importance in mind, icons addressing motherhood provide ample fodder for a theology of motherhood to be gleaned from the Church's images. Furthermore, the existence of icons is predicated on the Incarnation—on Jesus Christ assuming a human body through his mother—which in turn, of course, is predicated on the Birthgiver's role in the Incarnation.

This chapter provides a view of the overall importance and meaning of icons for Orthodox Christians. It then offers a brief history of iconography that demonstrates how closely the

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[3] Ephrem the Syrian, "Nativity 4," in *Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns*, trans. Kathleen E. McVey (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), 101.
[4] Gabriel Bunge, *The Rublev Trinity* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2007), 60.
[5] John of Damascus, "Treatise I on the Divine Images," in *Three Treatises on the Divine Images*, trans. Andrew Louth, (Crestwood, NY: Saint Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2003), 21.

Birthgiver's pregnancy and birthgiving are bound together with the development and defense of icons. I then touch on ways in which the Birthgiver's motherhood offers both an affirmation of doctrine about Christ's person and a basis for the defense of icons themselves. For source material, I delve into two maternal iconographic depictions of pregnancy: the *Ustyug Annunciation*—a variation on the more common prototype of Annunciation icon represented in the previous chapter—and the *Visitation* icon depicting the Birthgiver and her cousin Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist. These two icons offer a witness to the Church's rightful embrace of the maternal body, and the *Visitation* icon presents an example of encounter with the divine made possible through the kinship between mother and child. I conclude this chapter both with the recommendation that the Church continue to seek ways to acknowledge pregnancy and pregnant women in worship and with the hope that, in tandem with more women becoming iconographers, representations of pregnancy in iconography will flourish.

Maternal Body: Icons

Later in this chapter, I examine two icons depicting pregnancy, but first it is necessary to understand what icons *are* within Orthodox Christianity. To this end, I now offer a view of how icons are used and perceived, their theological significance, and their history. Though the Birthgiver herself is not often highlighted as an important component in the history of iconography, her maternal body, in fact, played an important role in the development and preservation of the iconographic tradition. Furthermore, her personal experience and the ways in which she is remembered and venerated have contributed to Orthodoxy's deep reverence for the pregnant human form.

Orthodox Christian icons are painted representations of holy human beings: either Jesus Christ or any number of saintly humans from Orthodox tradition. Sometimes these representations

show people in the context of events—for example; feasts, such as the celebration of the Nativity, the birth of Jesus Christ. Most often, they depict just one or two persons, typically an Orthodox saint, along with various symbols that signify her or his biography. For instance, even if one does not know the name of the saint shown clutching a cross in an icon, one can infer from that cross that she was a martyr.

Icons hang in Orthodox churches, homes, and even in places of work or transportation. They are not instances of mere portraiture; rather, they are holy images venerated by the faithful, who prostrate themselves before an icon, making the sign of the cross before it and kissing it or touching their forehead to it. Icons are venerated in the sense that they offer a path to God. As twentieth-century Orthodox theologian Pavel Florensky states, "Icon painting is the transfixing of heavenly images, the materialization on a board of that living cloud of witnesses streaming about the throne."[6] Icons depict the saints, the holy people of the Church, and therefore bring them into the lived experience of the faithful with a presence that inspires veneration.

Just as icons are more than mere portraiture, so also they offer more than mere instruction. They do possess a didactic quality—they can serve, for example, to tell a parable of Christ's or depict a festal scene—but they cannot be reduced to this function. As Leonid Ouspensky observes, "The Church sees in the icon not a simple art, serving to illustrate the Holy Scriptures, but a complete correspondence of one to the other, and therefore attributes to the icon the same dogmatic, liturgic, and educational significance as it does to the Holy Scriptures."[7] In addition, icons contain no single meaning; instead, like the Orthodox understanding of scripture, they are multivalent, containing many meanings and open to many interpretations.

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[6] Pavel Florensky, *Iconostasis*, trans. Olga Andreyev and Donald Sheehan (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1996), 68.

[7] Vladimir Lossky and Leonid Ouspensky, "The Meaning and Language of Icons," in *The Meaning of Icons* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1999), 30. This citation is from Ouspensky's portion of the book; henceforth, I refer only to the one of these authors from whom I quote in a given instance.

Thus icons are not just accouterments of worship in Orthodoxy; to the contrary, they occupy an integral position in Orthodox worship. As twentieth-century Orthodox scholar Michel Quenot writes, "If words and texts, as drawn from thought, are addressed first and foremost to our intelligence, the images speaks to the senses, touching the heart above all. Although a text can touch a heart, even quite powerfully, it must nonetheless pass through our intelligence, by which it is controlled to a certain degree. Conversely, due to its spontaneity, an image eludes the filter of reason when it is first beheld."[8] This spontaneity, this direct connection to the heart, makes icons accessible and meaningful to all of the faithful.

Icons are also critical to Orthodox tradition in another way—specifically, that they carry their own theological significance, which complements the written theology of the Church. Therefore, even though theology and iconography are sometimes talked about as two different fields, theology for Orthodoxy is by no means confined to the written word. Ouspensky notes the ways in which theology and iconography carry out the same mission: "The task of both alike is to express that which cannot be expressed by human means, since such expression will always be imperfect and insufficient. . . . Both theology and iconography are faced with a problem which is absolutely insoluble—to express by means belonging to the created world that which is infinitely above the creature."[9]

Stylized Transfiguration

One of the points of contrast between icons and many other forms of Christian depictions of the saints is the stylization of the human form. Icons often depict faces as elongated, features as deeply set, and garments as draping in a fashion alien to reality. This stylization is not merely a technical

[8] Michel Quenot, *The Resurrection and the Icon* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1997), 7.
[9] Ouspensky, *The Meaning of Icons*, 49.

feature of the traditions of iconography; rather, it holds theological significance, which springs from both the Incarnation of Jesus Christ and the concept of transfiguration of the human person.

The Orthodox tradition affirms, articulates, and celebrates the Incarnation in its depiction of religious images, and this depiction of images via iconography is itself enabled by the reality of the Incarnation. Orthodox Christianity understands Christ as God become flesh, as the divine entering thoroughly and completely into the material realm. In doing so, Christ sanctified the material world, especially the human body. In turn, icons celebrate and safeguard this understanding of the material world and of the body. In this way, they are essential to the Church as they remind humanity of a truth with which—given the various tendencies of dualistic and gnostic thinking throughout the entire Christian era—many of the faithful continue to struggle. In this vein, John of Damascus memorably defends the relationship between icons and the Incarnation when he says, "I do not venerate matter, I venerate the fashioner of matter, who became matter for my sake and accepted to dwell in matter and through matter worked my salvation, and I will not cease from reverencing matter, through which my salvation was worked."[10] This theology embraces the human form of Jesus Christ and therefore all human forms, because they have been sanctified by his Incarnation.

Consideration of the Incarnation and icons leads to the concept of transfiguration. Just as Jesus Christ was transfigured on Mount Tabor, part of each human's path to deification is a process of transfiguration that reveals her or his image of, and likeness to, God. Accordingly, icons depict the saint as a transfigured *human being*, and persons depicted in icons are recognizable—whenever possible—as the person they were in their human life.[11] An example is found in the depictions of

[10] John of Damascus, "Treatise I on the Divine Images," *Three Treatises*, 29.
[11] This is not always possible. My youngest daughter is named after Saint Beatrix of Rome. Beatrix did not have a continuous iconographic tradition, so when we commissioned an icon painter to write an icon of her, he did so by using both a prototype of early female martyrs and his own inspiration.

Saint John Maximovitch of San Francisco, who died in 1966, and whose icons show a recognizable resemblance to the man. Yet even when a saint is known personally to many living people and is the subject of abundant photos, the depiction of the saint in icon form is not photographic. The depiction of the person in the icon is not intended to serve as a portrait of his or her visage in the earthly sojourn. Rather, it is stylized in a traditional manner, typically with the elongated face and form. The manner and degree of stylizing may depend on the tradition and era of the icon—for example, Greek, Slavic, or American. Greek icons, for example, tend to show rounder, relatively more naturalistic human forms, whereas Russian forms tend toward elongation. In one way or another, however, a balance is struck (again, when possible, since not all saints were photographed) between recognizability and stylization.

Stylization is used not merely for conformation to an artistic trope; indeed, it carries theological significance. Stylization of the human form points to the transfiguration of body and soul that a human being undergoes in her or his process of deification. As Quenot observes, "It is not human flesh in its corruptible state that is represented, but incorruptible, transfigured and deified flesh."[12] Human beings are called to deification, to the ultimate intimacy with God, and in this process of transfiguration they become fully human. Inasmuch as the Incarnation is the healing of the breach between the divine and the human, incarnation and transfiguration go hand in hand. As twentieth-century Orthodox theologian Philip Sherrard writes, "Without incarnation there would be no transfiguration—no recovery of the vision of God; but equally, without transfiguration there would be no incarnation—no revitalizing by God of the divine energies within man's soul and body so that his whole being radiates with the Divinity made incarnate."[13]

[12] Michael Quenot, *The Resurrection and the Icon*, 10.
[13] Philip Sherrard, *The Sacred in Life and Art* (Greece: Denise Harvey, 2004), 90.

Transfiguration signifies, in the words of Sherrard, "the most intimate and exalted experience of which [one] is capable."[14] It involves change and acceptance at the same time—change in the sense of constant orientation and reorientation to God, and acceptance in the sense of embracing one's physical and spiritual being, one's person. The depth and importance of transfiguration may not always be clear. Sherrard, for one, thinks that "the idea that a precondition of fulfilling the Christian life is a radical rebirth or regeneration of the kind signified by transfiguration has been progressively eroded."[15] In the face of this potential for erosion, icons provide a reminder of the possibility of transfiguration, of increasing in holiness. In turn, appreciating the theological significance of icons helps to preserve the understanding that "Christian life is a radical rebirth" of the person. The stylization of the human form in iconography suggests the availability of this transfiguration to all people and serves to evoke this concept in the faithful who pray with and venerate icons. As Ouspensky explains, "Transmitted in the icon, this transformed state of the human body is the visible expression of the dogma of transfiguration and has thus a great educational significance."[16]

[14] Ibid., 86.
[15] Ibid., 103.
[16] Ouspensky, "The Meaning and Language of Icons," in *The Meaning of Icons*, 38.

Icons and the Birthgiver

Hodegetria or *She Who Points the Way*, twelfth century, Greece[17]

Images were part of Christian worship from the very beginning, and over time particular forms of images developed, including iconography. The history of Christianity and the history of Christian images are closely intertwined because, as noted earlier, images provide direct affirmation of the Incarnation of Jesus Christ—of his taking on the human form. As Ouspensky writes, "The image is necessarily inherent in the very essence of Christianity, from its inception, since Christianity is the revelation by God-Man not only of the Word of God, but also of the Image of God."[18] The Incarnation is affirmed, articulated, and celebrated in Orthodox icons and the Birthgiver herself played a central role in this affirmation. She did so in three particular historical moments: at the Council of Ephesus, at the Second Council of Nicaea, and in the time period after the Second

[17] *Hodegetria*, Greece, May 20, 2005, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hodegetria#mediaviewer/File:Meister_von_Torcello_002.jpg.
[18] Ouspensky, "The Meaning and Language of Icons," in *The Meaning of Icons*, 25.

Council of Nicaea. During these three moments, her maternal body—the fact that she experienced the pregnancy, birth, and care of her son—was critical to the development and preservation of iconography.

Because the Birthgiver is, at a minimum, functionally foundational to the Incarnation, she is also foundational to the icon; indeed, because of her role in the Incarnation of Jesus Christ, icons are possible. This view is encapsulated by Saint Theodore the Studite, who played an important role in the defense of icons in the eighth century: "From the moment Christ is born of a Mother who can be depicted, He naturally has an image which corresponds to that of His mother. If He could not be represented by art, this would mean that he was not born of a Mother who can be depicted, but was born only of the Father and that He was not Incarnate."[19] Before Theodore wrote these words, the appellation of "Theotokos" for the Birthgiver was confirmed as validation of Christ's fully human and fully divine natures united in one person at the Council of Ephesus (also known as the Third Ecumenical Council) of the fifth century. The same council refuted Nestorianism, which understood Jesus Christ as a human with a divine aspect and denied the Birthgiver her motherhood of God by refusing to call her Theotokos, instead using the term "Christotokos."[20] In opposition to the Nestorians, the council confirmed the title Theotokos, which had been in use for a century and affirmed Christ as fully human and fully divine. His full humanity was affirmed on the basis of his mother's visceral childbearing. Granted, the title Theotokos was a Christological statement; it was validated by Ephesus not in honor of the Birthgiver but in honor of her son. However, as Vladimir

[19] Theodore the Studite, "Refutations," *Patrologia Graeca*, vol. III, chapter 3. 2, section 3, 99, quoted in Michel Quenot, *The Icon: Window on the Kingdom*, 39.

[20] For a fine exposition on the council and its debates around the title of Theotokos, see Elisabeth Behr-Sigel, "Mary, the Mother of God: Traditional Mariology and New Questions," in *The Ministry of Women in the Church*, trans. Fr. Steven Bingham (Redondo Beach, CA: Oakwood Publications, 1991) 181-216.

Lossky notes, "At the same time, indirectly, there is a dogmatic confirmation of the Church's devotion to her who bore God according to the flesh."[21]

One response to the affirmation at Ephesus was the development of the Hodegetria—the icon type of the mother and child pair, the Birthgiver and Christ—which is so influential to the Birthgiver's entire iconographic tradition. In a Hodegetria (which can be translated as "She Who Points the Way"), the Birthgiver holds Christ in her arms. Sometimes in this icon type she is shown in a full-length standing position, as in both the twelfth-century Greek *Hodegetria* from Cyprus reproduced above and the earliest extant example, which is from fifth-century Kiti in Cyprus. At other times, only her upper body is seen, as in two well-known Roman examples—the *Santa Maria Nova Hodegetria* and the *Pantheon Hodegetria*. Nearly always, both mother and child look directly at the viewer. One of the Birthgiver's hands, usually her right one, gestures to Christ, in order to show the viewer what this image, and indeed what Christianity, is all about: Christ himself.[22] The Birthgiver is understood in these images as pointing the way to Christ—as leading and showing the way to him.

Although depictions of the Birthgiver are nearly as old as Christian tradition itself—as reviewed a bit later, images of the Annunciation and of the Birthgiver nursing Christ have been found from as early as the second or third century in Roman catacombs—this fifth-century style presents the Birthgiver and Christ as one visually unified form, which was a new and very influential development in depictions of the Birthgiver and her son. This form, which

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[21] Vladimir Lossky, *In the Image and Likeness of God*, trans. various (Crestwood, NY: Saint Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1974), 196.

[22] Art historians Thomas F. Mathews and Norman Miller suggest that the Hodegetria type was developed from the *Galaktotrophousa* images—the icons that depict the Birthgiver breastfeeding the Christ Child—and that the Birthgiver's hand (right or left, as the case may be) that gestures to Christ is a remnant of the hand that would have supported Christ in a nursing position. They suppose that the Galaktotrophousa would not have been popular in this period, due in part to then-forming ideas of Christian in women. See Thomas F. Mathews and Norman Miller, "Isis and Mary in Early Icons," in *Images of the Mother of God: Perceptions of the Theotokos in Byzantium*, ed. Maria Vassilaki (Farnham, Great Britain: Ashgate, 2005), 3–12.

communicates the Birthgiver's clear instruction about the importance of her son, upholds the doctrine from Ephesus that simultaneously affirms both Christ's divinity—as underscored in some Hodegetrias that show angels flanking the Birthgiver and her son—and his full humanity by showing mother and child together. Indeed, the Birthgiver's role was viewed as so important to Christology that Christ is rarely depicted alone in this historical period. This icon type, along with its variants, has remained as one of the most popular ways of depicting Jesus Christ and his mother to this day.

Just as the Birthgiver played a crucial role in the articulation of Jesus Christ's person in the Council of Ephesus, she also played a critical role later, during the Second Council of Nicaea in the eighth century, also known as the Seventh Ecumenical Council. By that time, a movement against icons had been perpetrated by a series of emperors, and this effort included wide-scale destruction of icons, as well as persecution of people protecting them. The Second Council of Nicaea refuted this rejection of iconography, decreeing on the basis of the Incarnation of Jesus Christ that icons are not merely permissible but in fact integral to the Church. The great defender of icons in this period, John of Damascus, explained their importance: "I am emboldened to depict visible God, not as invisible, but as he became visible for our sake, by participation in flesh and blood."[23] This participation in flesh and blood experienced by all of humanity is one of the essential components of the Incarnation that is clearly portrayed in the icons of the Orthodox Church. It can be seen in the Hodegetria icon type, as well as other icons with a maternal theme: icons of the conception of the Birthgiver, her birth, her presentation**,** her Annunciation, the Visitation, Christ's Nativity, and Christ's presentation. All of these affirm, in one way or another, the fully incarnate nature of human life with the fullness and holiness of the body as exemplified by Christ, and they remind the faithful that they are to—as Jesus Christ did—work out their salvation in and through their own bodies.

[23] John of Damascus, "Treatise I on the Divine Images," *Three Treatises*, chapter 1.4, 22.

John of Damascus also stated, "I do not venerate the creation instead of the creator, but I venerate the Creator, created for my sake, who came down to his creation without being lowered or weakened, that he might glorify my nature and bring about communion with the divine nature."[24] A significant part of God becoming "visible for our sake" was the flesh of his mother, the Birthgiver. The presence of Jesus Christ's mother in her earthly, physical, maternal posture underscores the reality of the Incarnation. In keeping with this reality, the icon traditions relating to the Birthgiver and Christ affirm Christ's humanity and therefore also the affirm importance of the body and of the material world.

After iconoclasm was laid to rest by the Second Council of Nicaea, the Birthgiver's images were central to the development of new icon prototypes, particularly in some of the festal icons depicting scenes of motherhood. It appears that prior to iconoclasm, Marian images developed primarily as visual expressions of verbal doctrinal articulations, as seen in the example of the development of the Hodegetria icon type following the Council of Ephesus. After iconoclasm, however, the development of images of the Birthgiver became less clearly linked with doctrinal matters; instead, an efflorescence of images formed an avenue of constructive theology in their own right. This move—to icons not as doctrinal markers but as theology—stemmed quite naturally from the thinking of the iconodules, who supported icons. John of Damascus argued that icons are inextricably tied to other aspects of worship—the saints, scripture, the cross. This argument in turn led to the blossoming of iconography into a form of theology itself, and this shift is well illustrated by developments in depictions of the Birthgiver's life cycle.

The most prominent example of these life cycle icons types dates from the fourteenth-century mosaics of the Paleologan-era Chora Church (located in Constantinople, modern-day Istanbul). These mosaics tell the tale of the Birthgiver's life, starting with her conception by her

[24] Ibid., 22.

parents Anna and Joachim, followed by her birth and the *Caressing*—the image of the Birthgiver as a child being held tenderly between her parents. This image provides the first known expression of parental affection in iconography. The Birthgiver's story continues in these icons, moving from her presentation in the temple through the nativity of Christ to her dormition (her death). The images are surprisingly evocative for mosaics, and though they are not effusive in their depiction of events, they register an undercurrent of emotion and tenderness in the fact that the depicted family members are clearly engaged with each other. Therefore, these icons look and feel quite different from the single-saint icons in which the person depicted is somewhat stoically arranged.

Some events and details shown in these icons derive from scripture—for example, the Annunciation and Christ's birth—but many more break the silence of scripture concerning details of the Birthgiver's life. Some of this content is derived from nonscriptural sources, such as the *Protoevangelium of James*, whose ideas gained new popularity when recapitulated in the seventh-century *Life of the Virgin* by Maximus the Confessor. As far back as these stories date, and despite the many associated feasts inaugurated in the sixth to eighth centuries,[25] details from them were introduced into iconography only in the late Byzantine era, during the twelfth to fourteenth centuries. The conception of the Birthgiver by Anna and Joachim, for example, was not essential to the Christological argument and thus was not taken up into images—even though it was quite present in texts—until Christology was settled, iconography was defended, and other matters could be safely explored.

After the threat against icons was resolved, the Church turned her theological attention to questions about the human and divine relationship. This shift is seen in the hesychasm movement (a monastic prayer practice intended to draw the human person and God into a close relationship), in the exploration of personal details of the relatives of Jesus Christ (primarily Anna and the

[25] Mary Cunningham, "All Holy Infant," *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 50, nos. 1–2 (2006): 136.

Birthgiver) in the hymns and homilies of the period, and, most especially, in this period's iconography. Among icons of the Birthgiver, the Eleousa, or Tenderness, icon type appears as a statement of the Birthgiver's maternal relationship not only with Christ but also with all of the faithful. It shows the Birthgiver and her son in a dignified yet tender embrace, often cheek to cheek. More generally, the vivid explorations of the Birthgiver's life cycle that gain popularity in this period help elucidate the relationship of the faithful to the Lord through the example of his mother's relationship with him.

The history of icons reveals how they are premised on the Birthgiver's maternal body. This grounding in the Birthgiver's physical form illustrates a respect for the maternal body in Orthodoxy, which, though not always stated directly, nevertheless underlies significant points of theological clarification and devotional practice in the Church. The development of icons over time in respect to the Birthgiver also affirms Orthodoxy's deep respect for—and full sanctification of—both the human form in general and the Birthgiver's maternal form in particular. I turn now to two specific icons that deal directly with the physicality of pregnancy and, in so doing, elicit a more theologically grounded understanding of the embodied human experience, as well as the potential for sanctified connection between human persons.

Pregnancy in Icons

Two icon types show a pregnant Birthgiver: a variant of the Annunciation icon type, discussed here, and the Visitation icon type which has one main iconographic tradition, reviewed later in the chapter. These icon types are not common, but the fact that they exist at all—and have held pockets of popularity across time and space—is meaningful in its own right. The Annunciation variant under review here is best known in the form of the *Ustyug Annunciation* icon of the angel Gabriel and the Birthgiver with the shadowy Christ in her womb. These depictions of the

Annunciation embrace the visceral experience of pregnancy and underscore the constitutional connection between mother and child. Just as Christ's humanity provided justification for the creation and veneration of icons, both of these icons of pregnancy affirm the full embodiment of pregnant women.

Ustyug Annunciation, twelfth century, Novgorod, Russia[26]

[26] *Ustyug Annunciation*, Novgorod, Russia, now in the Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow, August 18, 2011, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ustyug Annunciation.

The depiction of the encounter between angel Gabriel and the Birthgiver has an ancient history going back to the Priscilla Catacombs in Rome. That site is home to an Annunciation wall painting, most likely from the third century, in which the Birthgiver is positioned on the left, an angel (wingless, as was the custom of the time) is positioned on the right, and the angel gestures to the Birthgiver in a way that is very familiar to later images of the Annunciation, including the one reviewed in chapter 2. The presence of an Annunciation image in the catacombs is surprising in and of itself, given that most catacombs imagery consists of either Old Testament scenes placed in a New Testament understanding or of simple signs, many of which were assimilated from the larger pagan culture into the Christian code, such as the fish. In addition, this image of the Annunciation predates the addition of the feast to the liturgical calendar, which came three centuries later. Thus the early presence of this image speaks to the centrality of the Annunciation to the beginning of Christian thought and activity. In fact, in early Christianity Christ's Incarnation was understood as beginning not with his Nativity but with the Annunciation, which may explain why an Annunciation image, and not a Nativity, is included in the catacombs at such an early date.[27]

From the third century to the twenty-first, the basic format of the Annunciation icon type found in the catacombs is universal and recognizable. There is one variation of the Annunciation icon type, best represented by the *Ustyug Annunciation*, which comes from twelfth-century Novgorod, Russia, and uses a prototype likely dating back to the ninth century.[28] In the *Ustyug Annunciation* icon, the angel Gabriel is seen on the viewer's left, with his right hand reaching toward the Birthgiver in blessing. Even though his posture is more settled here than in the usual Annunciation style discussed in chapter 2, his heels are not quite touching the ground, which hints

[27] Mary Cunningham, "Introduction," in *Wider than Heaven: Eighth-Century Homilies on the Mother of God* (Crestwood, NY: Saint Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2008), 20. This stage of Christianity was also the scene of much theological debate about the merits of the virginal life, which may have been used to support the case for images of the Annunciation because they portrayed so clearly the lack of male partnership in the Birthgiver's pregnancy.
[28] Quenot, *The Resurrection and the Icon*, 120.

at the dynamism of the event of the Annunciation. The Birthgiver herself looks at the viewer, while holding the work that she is traditionally thought to have been doing when Gabriel encountered her: winding her distaff with yarn as part of weaving a curtain for the Temple. In her midsection hovers a shadowy image of a childlike Jesus Christ—above the anatomical location of the womb but certainly suggestive of his indwelling in his mother. His hand is extended in a traditional blessing, both of his mother and of the viewer. At the top of the image rests a tiny half-mandorla—a decorative ellipsis found as a common motif in iconography—that encloses an adult Jesus Christ also in a blessing posture.

The postures of the Birthgiver and Christ together in the *Ustyug Annunciation* suggest one of the most ancient icon types of the Birthgiver and Christ: the Icon of the Sign. This icon type was developed prior to the Council of Ephesus and is usually connected to the prophecy from Isaiah: "Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign; Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel" (Isa. 7:14 SAAS). A typical Icon of the Sign shows the upper part of the Birthgiver's body is shown in an *orans* (praying) position; her arms are raised, palms up, and she gazes directly at the viewer.[29] In front of her is Christ. She is not holding him, nor is he sitting on her lap; he is essentially floating in front of her in a mandorla. He also gazes directly at the viewer. This image may have been created in response to the First Council of Nicaea (AD 325), which denounced the Arian heresy that understood Christ as more creature than God. This image emphasizes Christ's divinity in that it suggests, rather than realistically depicts, the Birthgiver's pregnancy with Christ; the mandorla is positioned in front of the Birthgiver's upper chest, not her womb, and Christ is not an infant but a fully lucid child. Thus the icon affirms his divinity; yes, he was conceived of a woman, but only in a way that transcended the usual, creaturely order of things.

[29] A typical Icon of the Sign example comes from the Catacomb Coemeterium Majus in Rome and dates from the early fourth century.

The gazes of the mother and child, directed at the viewer, issue an invitation to contemplate this mystery and to witness that the two are distinct yet inseparable.

The *Ustyug Annunciation* is a combination of the icon types of the Annunciation and the Icon of the Sign. This unique combination underscores the fact that, through the Annunciation, the Birthgiver has newly conceived and is therefore already a mother—the Mother of God. As Michael Quenot writes about this icon, "The Child, with an adult head and his hand raised for blessing, is inscribed in the womb of his mother, the one who will give birth to the Lord in a divine conception effected by the Holy Spirit, according to the angelic message."[30] Thus the *Ustyug Annunciation* conveys the awesome mystery of the conception of God inside a human mother's womb: "The Annunciation beats within it the promise of a fullness affecting the whole of the cosmos. The embryo taking shape in the Virgin's womb is the God of all ages, beyond time and space."[31] At the same time, the icon affirms that motherhood begins not when a child is born but when a child is conceived. This stance is echoed in the ancient Christian tradition, mentioned earlier, in which the Incarnation was celebrated as beginning not with the Nativity, but with the Annunciation.

The Birthgiver does not wait until the Nativity to become the Mother of God; instead, she is shown as mother in the *Ustyug Annunciation* icon, which depicts her as pregnant. Here is evidence of the work of the Council of Ephesus and the Second Council of Nicaea: She is taking Jesus Christ, her savior and king, into her own flesh, to harbor him there until the time for his birth. This icon offers a stylized depiction of her pregnancy; as noted, Christ is not quite in the right place, and the image employs the usual elongated features and symbolic garments. In addition, the image shows the first moments of the Birthgiver's pregnancy, in which her girth would not yet have begun to

[30] Quenot, *The Resurrection and the Icon*, 120.
[31] Ibid., 121.

increase. All this being so, the icon is exceptional—both in its depiction of pregnancy, and in its affirmation of motherhood as beginning with conception.

The *Ustyug Annunciation* displays what was so vigorously defended at Ephesus and Second Nicaea: the Birthgiver's visceral, human motherhood. The existence of this icon, and its popularity, form a testament to the enduring appeal and importance of understanding the Birthgiver's maternal body as sacred—an understanding generated by Christ's sanctification of pregnancy by his experience in his own mother's womb during her pregnancy, and therefore an understanding that is rightfully extended to all maternal bodies.

Maternal Kinship: Icon of the Visitation

Visitation, twelfth-century, Macedonia[32]

[32] *Visitation*, Macedonia, Wikimedia Commons, April 10, 2010. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:The_Embrace_of_Elizabeth_and_the_Virgin_Mary.jpg.

The illustration of maternity with a visible child in the womb continues with the Visitation icon type. This icon engages the story, from the first chapter of the Gospel of Luke, of the pregnant Birthgiver visiting her cousin Elizabeth, who is pregnant with John the Baptist. The feast of the Visitation, celebrated on March 30, is a relatively new addition to the Orthodox liturgical calendar.[33] Though not common, icons of the Visitation do predate the official inclusion of this feast; indeed, they date back at least to the fifth century, as found on the ampullae (small oil vessels) used by pilgrims.[34]

> In Luke, the Visitation is described as follows:
>
> > Now Mary arose in those days and went into the hill country with haste, to a city of Judah, And it happened, when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, that the babe leaped in her womb; and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. Then she spoke out with a loud voice and said, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! But why is this granted to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For indeed, as soon as the voice of your greeting sounded in my ears, the babe leaped in my womb for joy. Blessed is she who believed, for there will be a fulfillment of those things which were told her from the Lord" (Luke 1:41–45 NKJV).

Like the *Ustyug Annunciation*, some Visitation icons include visibly pregnant mothers with shadowy images of a child in the womb. Both with and without the shadowy embryo, Visitation icons show the cousins embracing, thus sharing their motherhood. Typical versions of this icon type, such as the twelfth-century Macedonian example included here, show Elizabeth and the Birthgiver greeting each other in a cheek-to-cheek embrace. They are also often shown rushing into each other's arms in a way that is reminiscent of the urgency seen in the icon of Anna and Joachim; Luke does note that the Birthgiver went to Elizabeth "with haste." Notably, there are only a few other instances in which icons depict two people embracing. In this case, two cousins and dear friends are eager to find solace in each other's company, sharing, as they are, this exceptional time in their lives.

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[33] This feast was formally established through the work of Archimandrite Antonin Kapustin, who was head of the Russian Orthodox Ecclesiastical Mission in Jerusalem.

[34] For a helpful illustration of the Monza ampullae, see Leonid Ouspensky, *Theology of the Icon,* 82.

The emphasis on pregnancy, both scriptural and iconographic, is striking. Even the Visitation icons without the shadowy wombs celebrate pregnancy and anticipate the birthgiving of a child. Such images indicate the seriousness with which the Orthodox Church takes the human person, even in the womb. The above passage from the Gospel of Luke provides a tale of uterine connection. When the Birthgiver sees her cousin Elizabeth, she calls to Elizabeth. John—through his mother—hears in the Birthgiver's voice the good news that his savior is being carried in the Birthgiver's womb. He recognizes this from inside of his mother and starts gladly in response. Elizabeth knows that John moves in response to the Birthgiver's greeting: "as soon as the voice of your greeting sounded in my ears, the babe leaped in my womb for joy" (Luke 1:44 NKJV). Thus it is *through the two mothers' bodies* that John gains access to the knowledge that Jesus Christ is near; he is made aware through the Birthgiver's greeting and his own hearing of it through Elizabeth's body. This narrative provides a nuanced portrait of the maternal body at work and suggests that knowledge of Jesus Christ can be acquired by and through it. In this instance, a mother transmits to her unborn child an awareness of the Savior. This can also happen in more mundane motherhoods; indeed, mothers today can help their unborn children encounter Christ through their own maternal body through kinship, through the Eucharist, and, as noted in chapter 2, through their prayers.

In addition to the relationship between Jesus Christ and John, the icon presents the kinship between these two women; in fact, their love stands at the forefront of these images. A sense of camaraderie is present here: these women are both pregnant with their firstborn, and, Luke tells us, they spend three entire months together. The Birthgiver sings her *magnificat* neither to Joseph nor alone, but to her pregnant cousin Elizabeth. The Birthgiver and Elizabeth are already celebrating the Incarnation because they know (and so does the unborn John the Baptist) that it is underway. They share this awesome secret in kinship.

It makes sense that these icons—the *Ustyug Annunciation* and the Visitation icons—would be deeply personal; they are maternal images about the kinship between mother and child. Yet the meaning behind their intimacy goes beyond the two people being depicted, be they the Birthgiver and Elizabeth, or the Birthgiver and Christ. These icons show the movement of love: from mother to child, from child to mother. There is a circular kinship, a loop that continues eternally. These icons also issue an invitation to join that circle, to jump into the closed loop and become part of it by encountering God and his mother personally through the Birthgiver's maternal love that is extended to all people. These two maternal icons, then, not only illustrate a kinship—that of mother and child—but also extend an invitation to encounter God through a specific avenue: the contemplation of maternity.

Conclusions and Possibilities

Christ's Incarnation, which depended on the Birthgiver's conception and pregnancy, served as the inspiration and justification for icons. Therefore, the Birthgiver's role in Christ's humanity serves as a cornerstone of iconography and its importance in the Orthodox Church. Orthodox icons themselves are premised and defended on the basis of the physicality of her pregnancy and birthgiving. Her visceral role in Christ's conception, gestation, and birth is acknowledged and celebrated by the Church, both in prayer and in the suggestive icons reviewed here. More generally, all icons affirm and celebrate the human form, to the credit of mothers and all humans. In addition, Visitation icons provide a vision of the ways in which the divine can be encountered through the kinship between mother and child.

In the pregnant maternal body, a mother cannot escape her embodied, incarnate nature. At some other times in life, one may be capable of living as though one's brain is the only organ that matters, but this approach is not possible during pregnancy. Pregnancy *is* physicality. Even non-

triplet, medically uncomplicated pregnancies are physically intense. The sheer effort of carrying around extra pounds that squirm is enough to remind the mother of the constant presence of her full body; she is continuously brought back into her physical being. This physicality does not relent after the birth—an extremely physical act in itself. Nor does it relent during the postpartum healing of the mother's body; nor during her days, months, or years of lactation; nor indeed anytime soon, given her provision of physical care and her maintenance of proximity to her child—which is experienced by all mothers, whether they are biological, foster, or adoptive. It is thus very fitting that the Orthodox Church would acknowledge and celebrate the maternal body in the defense of iconography and represent it in specific icons.

At the same time, the two icons examined here that depict pregnancy—the *Ustyug Annunciation* and the *Macedonian Visitation*—are minority tradition icon types. They do appear in multiple places across time and space, and they are certainly conventional in their content, but they are by no means part of the dominant tradition. This reality stems from a couple of ready reasons: the Visitation feast, as discussed earlier, was added to the Church calendar only recently, so there has not been a great deal of time for its depiction to spread and flourish. (Even though images of the Visitation date from the early Church, festal icons tend to develop and then gain popularity *after* their inclusion in the calendar.) Also, in the case of the Annunciation, its typical icon has been consistent (for good theological reasons presented in chapter 2) since the earliest Christian images in the catacombs. Thus the *Ustyug* icon will always be a variant on the firmly established form of Annunciation icons. Beyond these two specific icon types—the *Ustyug*-style Annunciation and the Visitation, few occasions exist for the depiction of pregnant women in icons. Festal commemorations of motherhood and childbearing tend to address three moments: conception, birth, and presentation in the temple—not, say, mid-pregnancy, when a woman is rotund with new life.

Even so, a change is under way in contemporary Visitation icons created in the United States. Many new versions of this icon type—often made by women iconographers—show the Birthgiver and Elizabeth as visibly pregnant, whether by means of shadowy babes in their wombs or simply a profile view of their bodies. Here, a technical detail is relevant: According to Luke, Elizabeth was probably five months pregnant (and therefore likely to be visibly so) when the Birthgiver came for her visit. As Luke reports, "Now after those days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and she hid herself for five months" (Luke 1:24 NKJV), whereas the Birthgiver likely had just recently conceived. After reporting the Annunciation, Luke follows with the previously quoted remark: "Now Mary arose in those days and went into the hill country with haste, to a city of Judah, and entered the house of Zacharias and greeted Elizabeth" (Luke 1:39 NKJV). Technically speaking, then, the Birthgiver would not have been visibly pregnant at this point, but Elizabeth would have been. This difference does not, however, rule out suggestive imagery of the Birthgiver's pregnancy in icons, as seen in the *Macedonian Visitation* example, because icons are not traditionally restricted to a chronological narrative.

The American iconographer Christine Uveges is one who depicts the Visitation with a stylized Christ and John the Baptist present in the wombs of their mothers.[35] Her Visitation icon shows a small John the Baptist, with a child's body, bowing to his savior, presumably after his jump for joy. In return, Jesus Christ is blessing John. The two mothers embrace tightly above their sons, leaning slightly forward, perhaps to accommodate their maternal forms. This icon has been used in Orthodox pro-life work; for example, it was placed on posters for the annual March for Life in Washington, D.C., and has been printed and handed out on cards in the same setting. Uveges reports that she has been overwhelmed with interest in the icon. Though met with enthusiasm from

[35] See her work online at the Eikona Studios website, 2015, http://www.eikonastudios.com/sitemaps/view/company.

some quarters, however, it has also aroused opposition from others, who see it as an illegitimate expression of the Visitation (even though images of the Visitation with babes in the womb have existed for hundreds of years). [36] Those who oppose the icon express concern that it is "polemical"—that it was made, or at least is being instrumentalized, for a political purpose, in this case that of anti-abortion activism. [37]

This situation involves the ever-important issue of the continuance of traditional art forms: How or when is innovation—in content, use, or other aspects—appropriate or inappropriate? Icons have been employed for political purposes elsewhere in Christian history, and even the development of the Hodegetria might be labeled as polemical in the sense that it seems to have been fashioned in response to a doctrinal point. Thus, in my opinion, it is shortsighted to dismiss this icon merely because it has been used in politicized contexts. At the same time, it is important to consider how any new expressions of iconography display their continuity with the established tradition. To that end, it is not insignificant that a Visitation with Jesus Christ and John the Baptist visible in the wombs of their mothers is present in the chapel of the women's Monastery of the Holy Theotokos of the Lifegiving Spring in Dunlap, California. It was painted by one of the resident nuns, and its appearance in a Greek Orthodox monastery suggests the Visitation icon type's entry into mainstream iconography.

As noted in chapter 1, it is only recently that anything close to a critical mass of women has studied and done Orthodox theology. The same is true of Orthodox iconography. Regardless of what one makes of the ontological qualities of female and male, our cultural, lived experiences

[36] Christine Uveges, individual posting to online community discussion titled "Icon of the Visitation of the Theotokos and St Elizabeth," Monachos: Orthodoxy through Patristic, Monastic, and Liturgical Study, July 24, 2009, http://www.monachos.net/conversation/topic/3055-icon-of-the-visitation-of-the-theotokos-and-st-elizabeth/; "Awesome Icon of the Visitation," Christian Forums, 2014, http://www.christianforums.com/t7386963/.

[37] I have encountered this reaction in personal conversations. It is represented in the online discussion archived here: "Icon of the Visitation of the Theotokos and Saint Elizabeth," Monachos: Orthodoxy through Patristic, Monastic, and Liturgical Study, initiated October 17, 2008. http://www.monachos.net/conversation/topic/3055-icon-of-the-visitation-of-the-theotokos-and-st-elizabeth/.

mean that women and men are different and therefore that women are now—for the first time—bringing a female eye and hand to the creation of icons. This may mean that new legitimate icon types are formed or that icon types with an established tradition, such as the Visitation, are developed or transformed. I hope for another efflorescence of Orthodox iconography—one in which female iconographers work on all iconographic subjects and bring new views to images of women, including images of maternity.

Other aspects of church life in addition to iconography could also more fully acknowledge and appreciate the significance of pregnancy. In the contemporary Orthodox Church, some priests now pray by name for the pregnant women in their parish during a litany (a sequence of petitions for the Lord's mercy) in the Divine Liturgy. Specifically, they ask the Lord for the health and salvation of mother and child. This could become more widespread. Pregnancy has also been given particular attention in the Orthodox use of incense. Any Orthodox service includes incense, as a priest, deacon, or nun moves through the church to cense the icons, the altar, and the faithful by swinging an incense holder back and forth in front of them. Some Orthodox have proposed that pregnant women should be particularly censed by the priest during services as an acknowledgement that another being in the image and likeness of God dwells within them.

A personal example of the Church acknowledging the significance of pregnancy took place during the midpoint of my triplet pregnancy, which fell during Holy Week, the week of prayer and fasting that leads up to Orthodox Pascha (Easter). I attended one of my favorite services of the church year, the Holy Unction service, where all the faithful are anointed on their forehead and hands with chrism, a fragrant consecrated oil that is otherwise used in the anointing of babies and converts. As I approached Father Robert, I closed my eyes in prayer for the well-being of the three lives within me. I felt him make one cross on my forehead, and then, before moving to my hands, he—to my surprise—made three more crosses below, one for each person who I carried under my

heart that day. I was grateful, and it appeared that the babies were, too, because they all woke up at that moment and moved around, perhaps doing their own jumps for joy as they recognized the presence of Christ in that moment.

To me, this act on the part of my priest perfectly expresses the attitude of the Church toward pregnancy: one of reverence for the simple fact that a mother is not alone when pregnant. Indeed, another person (at least one) is with her, and is being beckoned forth into the world and called to eternity in Jesus Christ. At the moment when I was anointed four times, the physical and spiritual reality of pregnancy was appreciated, as were the connection of mother and child and the possibility for encounter with Jesus Christ through that connection. These possibilities can be better drawn out, better elucidated, and better developed through more attention from the Orthodox Church to the time of pregnancy in a mother's life, in iconography, in services, and in prayer.

Chapter 4: Birthgiving

Introduction

A typical pregnancy comes to an end after about forty weeks, but that end is actually a tremendous beginning. A woman's water may break, or her uterus may simply begin to contract, first erratically and then rhythmically. Her body prepares for birthgiving, and hopefully her mind and spirit do so as well, through the process of labor. The baby moves into position, typically head down, and is pushed through the vaginal canal by the contracting uterus and the mother's focused efforts. The tip-top of the baby's head, the crown, is seen first. Finally, the newborn issues forth from her or his mother's womb, emerging wet and possibly blood- or stool-streaked, into air and light and cold. The baby is embraced by her or his parents before or after the cutting of the cord, the strand that physically connected mother and child through the pregnancy. Finally comes the delivery of the afterbirth, the precious organ of the placenta that nourished the child within. The mother may be exhausted, and she may be elated, but she is always accomplished in the act of bringing a child from her womb out into the greater world.

My own childbirth experiences were not typical. With my firstborn, I experienced a Caesarean section about forty hours after my water started to leak, after many hours of hard labor, and after my cervix had become too swollen for delivery. I asked my obstetrician what would have happened if I had given birth unattended, in, say, an isolated location a hundred years ago. His answer was frank: "One or both of you would have died." Since this experience, I have been resentful of Shakespeare's characterization of MacDuff's birth, also a C-section, as meaning he was "none of woman born" (*Macbeth* 4.1.97). My birthgiving experience was not a typical one, but it was no less authentically a birthgiving. I also was accomplished in bringing a child out into the greater world.

Even so, far more memorable than the three birthgivings I experienced were the moments when my husband brought a newly born child to me and I looked into that child's eyes. Each time, I was somewhat improbably reminded of a description I once read of a kayaker's encounter with a whale. The whale surfaced slowly and purposefully right next to the kayak and tilted its large form in order to behold the kayaker with one mysterious eye. When I first held gaze with one of my babies, it felt reminiscent of the kayaker's encounter with the whale: I, too, experienced the sacramental quality of communing with something at once alien, beautiful, and perfect. Most memorable among those encounters was the moment when my first daughter appeared next to my face. I looked into her looming eyes and noticed a beautiful aberration: swimming in the gray-blue birth color of her right iris was a dark pool of brown. This mark remains with her today, and to me it symbolizes her sheer uniqueness and beauty among creatures. I will never forget those first moments with her, nor will I forget the first moments with my other children.

My understanding of my birthgiving experiences, though partially based on personal experience, is also informed by the teachings of the Orthodox Church. Birth, perhaps even more than conception or pregnancy, serves as a focal point in Orthodoxy. For one thing, the Orthodox year begins with a birth: The first major feast of the church year is the Nativity of the Birthgiver which occurs on September 9. Iconography abounds with images of the Nativity of the Birthgiver and the Nativity of Jesus Christ, both of which appear in icons in nearly every Orthodox Church. Furthermore, the auspicious birth of Jesus Christ is mentioned in every liturgical service—every Liturgy, every Vespers, every prayer of the Hours.

The entire Christian story depends on a birth, and that particular birthgiving—the Birthgiver's labor and delivery of Christ—provides the focus for this chapter. I understand that this decision may raise questions in some minds. When I explained to an acquaintance the focus of my dissertation—a theology of motherhood—her immediate response was, "Well, you are going to

have to look for sources other than the Virgin Mary." When I, puzzled by this statement, asked her why she thought the Birthgiver was out of bounds for a theology of motherhood, she told me that she sees the Birthgiver as elevated—as so exceptional, so far above normal mothers—that she has nothing to offer to a theology of motherhood. This friend is Catholic, but Orthodox Christians, both the non-theologian faithful and professional theologians, are not immune to elevating the Birthgiver beyond reproach in such a way that she is also beyond *approach*. This is an understandable impulse: The Birthgiver was an exceptional person, and an exceptional mother, both in her own personal holiness and in the mode of her conception. No other mother is considered by Orthodox Christians to be the most saintly, most perfect human person. No other biological mother is also a virgin. In addition, the Birthgiver is understood in Orthodoxy as the "mother of all"—as a maternal figure available to all humans for succor and intercession. There is, then, some reason to surmise that her experience of motherhood does not apply to the typical woman whose accolades do not meet this high standard.

Clearly, however, I view the Birthgiver as a legitimate resource for a theology of motherhood, as evidenced in previous chapters when I turned to the Birthgiver's icons, theology, and hymns. In this chapter, I explore how the Birthgiver's birthgiving, in its vaunted status, is meaningful for a theology of motherhood that is accessible to more mundane experiences of childbirth. In order to do so, I examine the state of Orthodox Mariology and the Birthgiver's status as both virgin and mother in Orthodox dogma and doctrine.[1] I then turn to her virginity at conception, which requires revisiting the Annunciation, viewed iconographically in chapter 2, from a dogmatic viewpoint. I also examine the doctrine of the Birthgiver's perpetual virginity—her

[1] Although the terms *dogma* and *doctrine* are sometimes used interchangeably, the understanding of them that I use here views dogma as the divine revelation offered in authoritative church teaching from Jesus Christ, the apostles, or the canons of the councils; doctrine, on the other hand, is viewed as traditional church teaching that is accepted but may not be overtly present in teachings from Jesus Christ, the apostles, or statements from the councils.

virginity for the remainder of her life. Both of these beliefs about her virginal status are solidly embraced in Orthodox theology and piety, and thus my presentation of them is cursory.

I devote more time to reviewing the theology about the Birthgiver's virginity that is most significant to this project: the notions about her virginity *during* the birth of Jesus Christ. I explicate how her common epithet "Ever-Virgin"—meaning virgin before, during, and after giving birth to Jesus Christ—is utterly accepted in Orthodoxy on the basis of her complete abstinence from sexual relations throughout her life. I look carefully at speculation about her experience of birth—notably, whether she experienced pain and whether her body was altered by birth—which often gets compiled under the heading of *virginitas in partu*, of her virginity during childbirth. In this examination, I turn to theologians, including theologian-poets, of the Orthodox Church, and I show how the understanding that the Birthgiver experienced birthgiving with sensation that altered her body both protects Jesus Christ's humanity and illustrates that Jesus Christ sanctified human birthgiving. This understanding establishes the Birthgiver as accessible to women in their own human birthgiving experiences and offers a new theological basis for esteem for the maternal body.

In my quest to understand the possible meaning of the Birthgiver's birthgiving for a theology of motherhood, I also turn to iconography. Specifically, I review two icons of Christ's Nativity, which offer different but equally valid and important perspectives on the Birthgiver's birthgiving. I reflect on how Orthodox tradition has room for these two variations of Nativity iconography, even in their emphasis on different theological points. I particularly examine the posture and gaze of the Birthgiver in the more ancient type of the Nativity icon, which illustrates her "pondering in her heart" (Luke 2:19) after childbirth. This version suggests a cultivation of kinship through maternal contemplation. I conclude this chapter with an appreciation for the Birthgiver's accessibility in a theology of motherhood—and for what can be emulated in her iconographic Nativity pose.

Maternal Body: The Birthgiver's Birthgiving

Mariology in Orthodoxy

Twentieth-century Orthodox theologian Father Alexander Schmemann explains well the situation of Mariology in Orthodoxy: "A student of Mariology in the Orthodox Church may be struck by two apparently contradictory facts: on the one hand, a tremendous richness of Mariological material in liturgy, yet, on the other hand, a virtual absence of specialized Mariological studies in theology. It is indeed a real paradox of the Orthodox East that the whole of its Mariological experience and piety seems to have permeated its worship but did not provoke any significant theological reflection."[2] (The same might be said of motherhood.) Though I would not use Schmemann's term *absence* to describe the state of Mariology in Orthodoxy—thanks to such significant contributions as the twentieth-century Russian theologian Sergius Bulgakov's *Burning Bush*—it is true that Mariology has not quite grown into its own field of study within Orthodoxy.[3] This state of affairs stands in particular contrast to that of traditional Catholic theology, which includes a corpus of theological work dedicated to the Birthgiver. It also stands in contrast to the work of Catholic and other Christian theologians who have dedicated theological thinking to the Birthgiver in the form of feminist theology.

The small body of Orthodox theological thought devoted to the Birthgiver includes two official dogmatic statements concerning the Birthgiver: the two statements affirmed by one of the seven recognized Ecumenical Councils of the Orthodox Church. One appears in the Nicene Creed, which states that Jesus Christ was "born of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary," and was approved at the First Council of Constantinople in AD 381. The other is the affirmation at the Council of

[2] Alexander Schmemann, *The Virgin Mary*, Celebration of Faith, vol. 3 (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1995), 85.

[3] See Sergius Bulgakov, *The Burning Bush: On the Orthodox Veneration of the Mother of* God, trans. Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009). One recent contribution to Orthodox Mariological studies is Christiaan W. Kappas' *The Immaculate Conception: Why Thomas Aquinas Denied, While John Duns Scotus, Gregory Palamas, and Mark Eugenicus Professed the Absolute Immaculate Existence of Mary* (New Bedford, MA: Academy of the Immaculate, 2014).

Ephesus in AD 431 that the Birthgiver is rightly called "Theotokos," as discussed in chapter 3. The earlier statement addresses the Birthgiver's simultaneous virginity and motherhood, whereas this latter statement addresses just her motherhood (and Christ's humanity).

Though it is meaningful that these two are the only Orthodox dogmatic statements about the Birthgiver, the Orthodox understanding of her is not limited to dogma. As Vladimir Lossky observes, it is impossible "to separate dogmatic data, in the strict sense, from the data of the Church's cultus, in a theological exposition of the doctrine about the Mother of God. Here dogma should throw light on devotion, bringing it into contact with the fundamental truths of our faith; whereas devotion should enrich dogma with the Church's living experience."[4] As explored in preceding chapters, theological understanding of the Birthgiver in the Orthodox Church is informed by texts and tradition associated with the Birthgiver, as well as by the direct statements made about her in formal church proceedings.

A principle of Orthodox Mariology is the Birthgiver's position as both mother and virgin, which is best understood in light of Orthodoxy's love of paradox. The Orthodox Christian tradition celebrates tension between poles; indeed, it praises paradox. The nonpareil example of this characteristic comes in the understanding of Jesus Christ, who is paradoxically—yet completely—both fully God and fully human. Another excellent example is found in the Birthgiver, who is simultaneously virgin and mother. Both sides of this paradox hold particular significance for Christian tradition and history. In the early Church, the Birthgiver's virginity was used as a major argument in favor of consecrated virginity, which effectively offered women in the ancient world the first noble vocation beyond motherhood and homemaking.[5] At the same time, the Birthgiver's

[4] Vladimir Lossky, *In the Image and Likeness of God*, trans. various (Crestwood, NY: Saint Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1974), 196.

[5] "Monasticism allowed women to step free of inherited roles and expectations and opened up new vocations in church and society. For the first time in Western history, women became public figures who were admired for their virtue,

role as Christ's mother also formed part of the Church's understanding of women and family, which contributed to the understanding of marriage as a sacrament in the Church.[6] The ideal handling of such a paradox requires an elevation of both of its poles—an equal esteem for both, or, at least, an ever-shifting balancing act between the two. The balance between poles occasionally shifts, and this has been the case at various times in the history of the Orthodox Church when the virginal life has been placed above the familial one.

Within Orthodoxy, the topics of motherhood and virginity are vast, and not all aspects of either are covered here. Instead, I focus on just one aspect: how the Birthgiver's virginity affects her motherhood, and what significance this holds for an Orthodox theology of motherhood. I consider the three previously mentioned dimensions of the Birthgiver's virginity—her virginity before, during, and after birthgiving—and I give special attention to the notion of her virginity during childbirth due to its significance for understanding her maternal body. I offer a Christologically sound vision of her birthgiving that allows for both the traditional respect for her unchanging virginity and a loving regard for her altered maternal body.

Virginal Conception

Affirmations of the Birthgiver's virginity at conception are included in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke (Matt. 1:18, 23, 25; Luke 1:26, 28). Luke himself is understood to have been a historian, and Orthodox tradition holds that he did historical research and confirmed the Birthgiver's virginity from those who knew her well—perhaps from the Birthgiver herself.[7] A related tradition holds that Luke wrote the first icon, which depicted the Birthgiver, and his thus understood intimacy with the

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piety, learning, and wisdom." Robert Louis Wilken, *The First Thousand Years* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012), 105.

[6] The Birthgiver's urging that Christ intervene at the wedding at Cana, hence performing his first miracle, is understood as one reason that the Church embraces marriage as a sacrament.

[7] Jaroslav Pelikan, *Mary Through the Centuries* (New Haven, CT: Yale, 1996), 17.

Birthgiver supports his affirmation of her virginity at the Annunciation. This understanding was held in the early Church and then, as noted earlier, proclaimed as dogma at the First Council of Constantinople. In addition, the early church understood the Birthgiver's virginity to have been prophesied by Prophet Isaiah (Isa. 66:7) and echoed in the New Testament in the Gospel writer Matthew's citation of Isaiah 7:14: "Behold a virgin will be with child" (Matt. 1:23 NKJV).

The understanding of the Birthgiver's virginity at the Annunciation has always been a Christological cornerstone in that her virginity is understood as a sign of the uniqueness of Christ himself. He was not born an ordinary person; rather, he was the eternal person of the Son, born of the Spirit of God the Father and his human mother. As Kallistos Ware explains, "Christ's birth from a virgin underlines that the Incarnation did not involve the coming into being of a new person. When a child is born from two human parents in the usual fashion, a new person begins to exist. But the person of the incarnate Christ is none other than the second person of the Holy Trinity. . . . So the Virgin Birth reflects Christ's eternal pre-existence."[8] In other words, the Birthgiver had to be a virgin; the Son of God could not enter a fetus already formed in the womb from intercourse between a wife and husband because that fetus is already a different, unique person. The internal logic of this understanding includes the notion that the Birthgiver was a virgin prior to the Annunciation in order to highlight the exceptional circumstance of bearing God inside of her own human body.

Elisabeth Behr-Sigel affirms the understanding of the virgin Annunciation that illustrates the uniqueness—the newness—of this moment in history: "From the often expressed Orthodox point of view, Mary remained in intimate solidarity with all mankind. Her virginal motherhood indicates that the Lord took the initiative for man's salvation, and that his entry into history transcends the

[8] Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Way* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1979), 76–77.

laws of fallen human nature without at the same time destroying the creature."[9] Dogmatically proclaimed and Christologically sound, this understanding of the Birthgiver's virgin Annunciation is unquestioned in Orthodox piety and theology.

Perpetual Virgin

Another stage of the Birthgiver's virginity is that of her "perpetual virginity," meaning that she did not have any other children and that she never had sexual intercourse, even after her delivery of Jesus Christ. This understanding is based both on tradition and is expressed in the aforementioned epithet of "Ever-Virgin," or *Aeiparthenos*, which was included in the conciliar proceedings of the Fifth Ecumenical Council, the Second Council of Constantinople.

In Church tradition, the *Protoevangelium of James* tells the tale of Anna's offering of the Birthgiver to the temple as a "virgin of the Lord," an act that carried with it the assumption that the Birthgiver would remain a virgin throughout her life. This assumption is largely affirmed in the typical Orthodox portrayal of the Birthgiver's life story, influenced by the *Protoevangelium*, which explains that Joseph was a much older man whose role in marrying the Birthgiver was not to have normal marital relations but to offer her safety and security that were unavailable to her elsewhere, since she had reached an age that meant she could no longer live in the temple.[10]

John Chrysostom defends the Birthgiver's perpetual virginity based on some of Jesus Christ's final words. Speaking from the cross in reference to his disciple John, Jesus says to his mother, "Woman, behold your son!" To John, he says, "Behold, your mother!" (John 19:26–27 NKJV). As Chrysostom observes, "if [Joseph] had known her, and had kept her in the place of a

[9] Elisabeth Behr-Sigel, *The Ministry of Women in the Church*, trans. Fr. Steven Bingham (Redondo Beach, CA: Oakwood Publications, 1991), 193.

[10] This account relates to the following chapter's inquiry into purity and impurity; some Christian thought about the Birthgiver suggests that she was married to Joseph because she was no longer welcome in the temple once she experienced menstruation.

wife, how is it that our Lord commits her, as unprotected, and having no one, to His disciple, and commands him to take her to his own home?"[11] This justification of the Birthgiver's perpetual virginity is widely held and is uncontroversial in the Orthodox Church.[12]

Orthodox theological thinking about the Birthgiver's perpetual virginity is well summarized by the recently deceased Orthodox theologian Thomas Hopko: "It is simply inconceivable to the saints that the woman who gave birth by the Holy Spirit to God's divine Son, His Word and His Wisdom, His Express Image and the Radiance of His Glory, should then proceed normally to mother more children in the usual manner. There is no deprecation of childbirth here, and certainly no disgust for the sexual union. There is rather the clear understanding of Mary, the one 'blessed among women.'"[13] Her particular role of motherhood was fulfilled with this one, special child.

These two teachings on the Birthgiver's virginity—her virginal conception and her perpetual virginity—are widely accepted, the first with the status of dogma and the second with the weight of tradition. Neither of these renders the Birthgiver unapproachable as a model of motherhood, because, regardless of the nature of her conception or of whether she had additional children (or intercourse without bearing children), she certainly nursed, bathed, carried, entertained, and *mothered* her son Jesus Christ during his childhood. Or, in Chrysostom's formulation, as explored in chapter 2, the Birthgiver *raised* her son. This is true also regardless of her about to be discussed virginity during childbirth. But, this third quality of her virginity bears on her approachability because it has to do with whether she experienced typical human childbirth.

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[11] John Chrysostom, "Homily V on Matt. 1.22–23," in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers,* vol. X, John Chrysostom: Homilies on the Gospel of Matthew, ed. Phillip Schaff (Grand Rapids, MI:. Eerdmans), n.d., http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf110.iii.V_1.html.

[12] For a brief explanation of the Orthodox understanding of the reference to Jesus' brothers in Mark 3:31, see Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Church* (New York, NY: Penguin, 1993), 258, including footnotes.

[13] Thomas Hopko, *The Winter Pascha* (Crestwood, NY: Saint Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1984), 125.

Virginity During Childbirth

More germane to this study than the Birthgiver's virginity at the Annunciation or her perpetual virginity after the birth of Jesus Christ are the issues surrounding the question of whether she remained a virgin *during* her labor and delivery of Christ. The immediate reaction to whether she remained a virgin during childbirth may be, "Of course she did," on the principle of the definition, just discussed, of her perpetual virginity: that she neither had more children after Jesus Christ nor had intercourse with Joseph. And clearly, she was doing neither during her delivery of her son. In this sense, she is unimpeachably "Ever-Virgin" before, during, and after the birthgiving of Jesus Christ. This understanding of her unchanging virginity is taught even to young children, when it is pointed out to them that she wears three stars on her robe in traditional iconography, representing her virginity before, during, and after childbirth.

What is at stake in discussions of her virginity during childbirth is not her status in terms of sexual intercourse, but instead the suggestion that her childbirth experience completely transcended the normal childbirth experience. Her conception of Jesus Christ was beyond the natural order of things, for the reasons stated earlier, but whether or not her physical birthgiving was also specialized in some way is not a point of dogma or doctrine in the Orthodox Church. Therefore, divergent theological ruminations on the topic have surfaced throughout the past two millennia. At issue in these considerations are two intertwined points: whether she experienced pain during labor and delivery and whether her body was marked by childbirth. These questions are intertwined because both express a larger question: Was the Birthgiver's body affected—either by pain or physical alteration—by her childbirth experience?

In reference to both points, I now evaluate whether the Birthgiver's labor and delivery were typically human in the sense of involving pain, intensity, or suffering and whether they included alteration to her body. Alterations of the physical body from both pregnancy and

childbirth can take many forms, but here I refer primarily to changes in the parts of a woman's body relating to childbirth. Her uterus, her cervix, her vaginal canal, and her hymen are stretched and permanently altered through the course of giving birth. The range of specific types of such alteration may be as large as the number of women who have given birth, but my understanding—and my premise—is that no human mother gives birth without physical alteration.

A word about terminology: I purposefully refer to the pain of labor and the changes wrought by delivery as "typically human" rather than "natural." Though painful labor and physical changes are natural in the sense of being part of the usual experience of childbirth (and it is in this sense that childbirth educators refer to nonmedicated, "natural" childbirth), they might also be deemed as "unnatural" in a Christian context, where the natural order of things properly looks to both the past—the original creation—and to the future, or life in the world to come. In the meantime, the present human experience is understood to be both illumined by the light of Christ and darkened by the long shadow of the Fall. Thus the current state of affairs in terms of labor and delivery is *unnatural* in that labor pain was not part of the original intention of the multiplying mentioned in the creation story in Genesis, instead it was a consequence of the Fall (Gen. 3:16). To avoid confusion over this important theological point, I use the term *typical* rather than *natural* to refer to a birthgiving experience that is physically altering and that includes sensation such as pain or suffering.

In the following discussion, I first examine thought from the patristic era on whether the Birthgiver's birthgiving included or did not include pain. I interpret and draw conclusions about these strands of thought and their understanding of pain. Next, I examine theological thinking about whether the Birthgiver's birthgiving left her physically altered or unaltered. I conclude that it is possible to simultaneously understand the Birthgiver as Ever-Virgin and still perceive and celebrate her birthgiving as typically human.

Painful or Pain-free Birthgiving

Many of the early church fathers were not willing to speculate on the exact nature of the Birthgiver's birthgiving, preferring—perhaps wisely—to leave the manner of the birth of Jesus Christ as a mystery.[14] Others, including Tertullian, advocate for a birth that was typical and did include pain. In Tertullian's works against the Marcionites—a sect that denied the physicality of Jesus Christ—he dwells on the Birthgiver's maternal body and insists that she experienced painful childbirth. This point was critical to his assertion—an assertion dogmatically embraced by the Orthodox Church—that Jesus Christ was fully, physically, and completely human. In questioning the Marcionites' beliefs, Tertullian seems alternately impressed and disgusted by the painfulness, the bloodiness, the messiness of the Birthgiver's delivery of Christ:

> But how can that Christ [the Marcionite understanding of Christ] of yours be liable to a shame, which it is impossible for him to experience? Since he was never condensed into human flesh in the womb of a woman, although a virgin; never grew from human seed, although only after the law of corporeal substance, from the fluids of a woman; was never deemed flesh before shaped in the womb; was never called fœtus after such shaping; was never delivered from a ten months' writhing in the womb; was never shed forth upon the ground, amidst the sudden pains of parturition, with the unclean issue which flows at such a time through the sewerage of the body . . . ?[15]

Tertullian is very clear through this characterization of Marcionite beliefs that the Birthgiver experienced a painful labor and delivery of Jesus Christ. As is typical of his writing, he sometimes rejects the cultural impurity and repugnance associated with women's blood (as will be seen in chapter 5) but at other times uses it as part of his argument (as was seen in chapter 1). He understands the human body to be simultaneously degraded and redeemed. These associations, and

[14] For a list of these thinkers who point to the mystery of Jesus Christ's birth—who include John Chrysostom and Saint Cyril of Alexandria—see Karl Rahner, "Virginitas in Partu," in *Theological Investigations Volume IV: More Recent Writings*, trans. Kevin Smyth (Baltimore, MD: Helicon Press, 1966), 159–160.

[15] Tertullian, "Against Eunomius," 4.21, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 3. trans. Peter Holmes, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing, 1885), rev. and ed. for New Advent by Kevin Knight, 2009, http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/03124.htm.

especially his telling of the birth of Jesus Christ, give Tertullian more fodder for one of his beloved points: that Jesus Christ's descent into the flesh was rightfully a scandal.

In contrast to Tertullian's rather graphic embrace of the Birthgiver's painful birthgiving, some patristic thinkers describe the Birthgiver as experiencing a pain-free labor and delivery.[16] For instance, Irenaeus argued that a pain-free birthgiving fulfilled a prophecy by Isaiah: "And yet again concerning His birth the same prophet says in another place: Before she that travailed gave birth, and before the pains of travail came on, she escaped and was delivered of a man-child. [Isaiah 66:7] Thus he showed that His birth from the virgin was unforeseen and unexpected."[17] Another thinker, Gregory of Nyssa, wrote in the fourth century, "When God became known to us in the flesh, He neither received the passions of human nature, nor did the Virgin Mary suffer pain, nor was the Holy Spirit diminished in any way, nor was the power of the Most High set aside in any manner, and all this was because all was accomplished by the Holy Spirit. Thus the power of the Most High was not abased, and the child was born with no damage whatsoever to the mother's virginity."[18] Thus Irenaeus' defense of a pain-free birthgiving is concerned with the fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah, whereas Gregory of Nyssa's defense is concerned with the Birthgiver's holiness and status as perpetual virgin, and he connects—or conflates—her pain-free birthgiving with her anatomical virginity.

Although Irenaeus and Gregory of Nyssa promote the idea of a truly exceptional birthgiving for the Birthgiver, another Christian thinker concurs that her birthgiving was pain-free, but insists that her birthgiving was otherwise typical. John of Damascus states that Christ's birth

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[16] Early Christian texts, such as the "Odes of Solomon" also described the Birthgiver's birthgiving as pain-free. For coverage of this text, see Jennifer A. Glancy, *Corporal Knowledge: Early Christian Bodies* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2010), 92ff.

[17] Irenaeus, "Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching," 69–151, n.d., *Christian Classics Ethereal Library*, transcr. Roger Pearse, 2003, http://www.ccel.org/ccel/pearse/morefathers/files/irenaeus_02_proof.htm.

[18] Gregory of Nyssa, "Against Eunomius, Hom. 11," *Patrologia Graeca,* from *The Life of the Virgin Mary, the Theotokos* (Buena Vista, CO: Holy Apostles Convent, 1989), 179.

was, and yet was not, achieved according to the typical biological sequence of birthgiving: "For He who was of the Father, yet without mother, was born of woman without a father's co-operation. And so far as He was born of woman, His birth was in accordance with the laws of parturition, while so far as He had no father, His birth was above the nature of generation: and in that it was at the usual time (for He was born on the completion of the ninth month when the tenth was just beginning)."[19] Thus John understands Christ's birth to be typically human, because he is born of a human mother, but also exceptional, because he is also born of a divine father. John goes on to suggest that the birth was exceptional in that it was painless: "His birth was in accordance with the laws of parturition, while in that it was painless it was above the laws of generation. For, as pleasure did not precede it, pain did not follow it, according to the prophet who says, Before she travailed, she brought forth, and again, before her pain came she was delivered of a man-child."[20]

Like Irenaeus, John of Damascus seems primarily concerned with the birth prophecy of Isaiah when he makes these assertions about a pain-free birth, but he does insist—in contrast to Irenaeus—that her birthgiving was otherwise typical. As seen in chapter 4, John is very concerned with Christ's authentic humanness in his defense of icons, and so perhaps he is careful in his thoughts about the Birthgiver's birthgiving so as not to impugn his defense of icons. In addition, in the second quoted passage from John noted here, he seems to be more focused on Christ's birth experience than on the Birthgiver's birthgiving, so his understanding of the Birthgiver's pain-free birthgiving likely has more to do with who Christ is than with who the Birthgiver is.

In addition to these motivations for understanding the Birthgiver's birthgiving as pain-free, a link was made in patristic times between the Birthgiver and the first woman, Eve. As Eve's punishment for her role in the Fall, she is cursed by God: "In pain you shall bring forth children"

[19] John of Damascus, "Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Christian Faith," in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, December 1984), book 4, chapter 14.
[20] Ibid., book 4, chapter 14.

(Gen. 3:16 SAAS). Just as Eve plays a role in the Fall from paradise, the Birthgiver plays an opposite role in the restoration of the path to paradise, and thus she begins to be understood as the "New Eve." This link between these two women is forged as early as the second century,[21] and it seems likely to have strengthened the notion that, in opposition to Eve's experience, the Birthgiver experienced no pain in childbearing.

The idea of a pain-free birthgiving is not unique to theological circles or to ancient authors. To the contrary, many contemporary guides to birthgiving discourage viewing it as always associated with pain and suffering.[22] Many also encourage readers to make a distinction between pain and suffering—to understand suffering as a preventable state of distress or anxiety that clouds the birthgiving experience and to understand pain as physical distress that can be managed through certain techniques and is purposeful and meaningful. As even this brief encounter with modern definitions of childbirth pain illustrates, the concept of "pain" is potentially complex. However, the ancient sources that perceive the Birthgiver as experiencing a pain-free birthgiving do not define pain, nor do they make any such distinction between pain and suffering. This approach—speaking of pain in undefined but clearly derogatory terms—fails to truly encounter the childbirth experience of any mother, including the Birthgiver.

More pointedly, the early Christian writers I have cited who advocate for a pain-free childbirth experience for the Birthgiver make arguments that lack complexity, nuance, and even precision in their portrayal of birthgiving pain. Therefore, it is difficult to evaluate their claims with any degree of confidence. The lack of nuance in the ancient writers may also indicate that their claims about pain-free childbirth were more conceptual than practical in origination. Though a

[21] See Pelikan, "Second Eve," in *Mary Through the Centuries*, 39–52.
[22] "For your labor and delivery do not need to be associated with pain and suffering." From William Camman and Kathryn Alexander, *Easy Labor: Every Woman's Guide to Choosing Less Pain and More Joy During Childbirth* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2006), xii.

pain-free birthgiving might serve as one indicator of Jesus Christ's divinity, it is no less the case that a pain-*full* birthgiving may have been the means of his entry into the world.

My concern about the lack of nuance in theological discussions of the Birthgiver's purportedly pain-free birthgiving is shared by the twentieth-century Catholic theologian Karl Rahner. He suggests that one who insists that the Birthgiver experienced pain-free birthgiving ought to ask certain questions:

> But he must still ask himself does he really know so exactly what pain is, and when and in what measure pain is really an expression of sin and not that of a healthy nature and an exuberance of life. Does he know well enough how pain is constituted, with its purely physiological components *and* its basic spiritual attitude, so that he can be asked how he understands painlessness, in view of the complexity of the concept of pain?[23]

Another concern about the supposition of the Birthgiver's pain-free delivery is that—even for those who hold this view either in respect for her holiness or in awe of the unique, supernatural nature of the conception—if her childbirth was alien to the human experience, then her son's supposed true humanity might also be alien to the human experience. This was Tertullian's concern, as noted above. Tertullian and others worked to uphold Christian doctrine and tradition regarding the Birthgiver that staunchly defend Jesus Christ's humanity on the grounds of his mother's humanity. Her conception is atypically human; it is exceptional because it is the manner in which God can become human. Jesus Christ is human from that moment of conception on, and this understanding can include a vision of his mother's birthgiving of him as typically human.

Jaroslav Pelikan notes that the tendency to exceptionalize the Birthgiver's birthgiving in light of her exceptional conception was an early church trend in narratives about Christ's birth, which likely influenced much of the patristic thought on his birth: "There are grounds to suppose that some of these legends about the Virgin Mary may implicitly have represented as well a

[23] Karl Rahner, "Virginitas in Partu," in *Theological Investigations Volume IV: More Recent Writings*, trans. Kevin Smyth (Baltimore, MD: Helicon Press, 1966), 159–160.

hesitancy to ascribe total humanity to her divine Son."[24] I turn later to these concerns, and others, but first I examine another related topic—the idea that the Birthgiver's anatomical virginity was preserved during childbirth.

Unaltered in Childbirth

The *Protoevangelium of James* quite explicitly tells of the Birthgiver's remaining a virgin during childbirth. In this tale of the Nativity, Joseph goes out looking for a midwife and bumps into one in the night who is willing to come with him. Her friend Salome comes as well:

> And the midwife cried out, and said: This is a great day to me, because I have seen this strange sight. And the midwife went forth out of the cave, and Salome met her. And she said to her: Salome, Salome, I have a strange sight to relate to you: a virgin has brought forth—a thing which her nature admits not of. Then said Salome: As the Lord my God lives, unless I thrust in my finger, and search the parts, I will not believe that a virgin has brought forth.
>
> And the midwife went in, and said to Mary: Show yourself; for no small controversy has arisen about you. And Salome put in her finger, and cried out, and said: Woe is me for mine iniquity and mine unbelief, because I have tempted the living God; and, behold, my hand is dropping off as if burned with fire.[25]

What exactly is Salome looking for when she places her finger into the Birthgiver's vagina: An intact hymen? An unabraded birth canal? A vagina without birth fluids? The text is not forthcoming on this point, yet Salome must have been feeling around for some sort of structural sign of the Birthgiver's unchanged physical condition from before conception to after childbirth. What she finds is made clearer: fire! It seems that she is punished for her lack of faith, though later in the narrative she is cured by Jesus Christ himself.

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[24] Pelikan, *Mary Through the Centuries*, 47.

[25] *Protoevangelium of James*, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 8, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, trans. Alexander Walker (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing, 1886), rev. and ed. for New Advent by Kevin Knight, 2009, http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0847.htm, sections 19–20.

The message of the *Protoevangelium of James* is that it is holy and right for the Birthgiver to have been unaltered, unscathed, by her labor and delivery. Though none of the characters in the *Protoevangelium* bat an eye at this action, the notion of an unfamiliar woman sticking her fingers inside the vagina of the Birthgiver of God immediately after childbirth strikes this modern reader as wildly inappropriate. I cannot imagine that this excerpt from the *Protoevangelium* was anodyne to ancient ears either, and it seems to directly contradict the *Protoevangelium's* effort to elevate the Birthgiver as particularly holy. How demeaning is it to treat her like a blue-ribbon fair cow whose uterus is palpated by show judges?

Also of concern in the *Protoevangelium of James* are the related questions of whether the Birthgiver exhibited other typical effects of childbirth, such as bleeding and delivering a placenta after the birth. These details pertain directly to her unscathed body. The Birthgiver's birthgiving is posited as being exceptional in the subtle ways in which it is described—and not described—so as to affirm that her childbearing body was sufficiently unaffected by childbirth that none of the usual postpartum bodily events took place. This exceptional quality of the Birthgiver's birthgiving is established partly in contrast to the birth of the Birthgiver herself. According to the *Protoevangelium,* Anna herself does not nurse her daughter during her time of lochia—the menstrual-like flow of uterine lining that takes place after childbirth—as is indicated by her delaying breast feeding until she is purified after the completion of her lochial bleeding: "And the days having been fulfilled, Anna was purified, and gave the breast to the child, and called her name Mary."[26] In contrast, the Birthgiver gives her newborn son the breast immediately after his birth: "The infant appeared, and

[26] *Protoevangelium of James*, section 5. This detail is fantastical, because it would have been physically impossible—in an era well before breast pumps—for a woman to delay nursing by several weeks and then nurse successfully; her milk supply would have dried up in the meantime. Instead of offering a realistic portrait of the way women nursed their infants in ancient times, the text offers a code that highlights the Birthgiver's exceptional qualities.

went and took the breast from His mother Mary."[27] In the ancient world, as noted by Jennifer Glancy, a contemporary historian of the early Church, this contrast would have been recognized as a clear story telling code indicating that the Birthgiver did not experience normal human childbirth: If she had experienced lochia like Anna or any other normal human mother, then she, like her own mother, would have held off from nursing after childbirth.[28] Through this code the reader of the *Protoevangelium of James* is told that the Birthgiver did not experience typical childbirth.

Typical Childbirth

Of course, the concern about the Birthgiver's virginity in childbirth has nothing to do with sexual intercourse during childbirth; not only is that absurd, but also the Church affirms her virginal conception in dogma and her lifetime virginity through widely held tradition based in scripture, as reviewed above. Instead, the concern about "virginity" in childbirth relates to the Birthgiver's maternal body and whether or not it is altered by childbirth, either in structure or in fluids, which ultimately is a similar concern to whether her birth experience included pain. The underlying question is the same: Was the Birthgiver's body altered or affected? Whereas the virginal conception makes theological sense, is held universally by the Church's theologians, and is anchored in scripture, and whereas the perpetual virginity, though not quite so critical for Christology, also has its basis in scripture and is supported by the proceedings of an ecumenical council, this notion—that the Birthgiver is unscathed by childbirth—lacks the Christological, scriptural, and conciliar backing.

It could be proposed that the focus on the Birthgiver's unscathed birthgiving might have been introduced in an effort to maintain Jesus Christ's divinity—to defend the view that he is fully

[27] *Protoevangelium of James*, section 19.
[28] Jennifer A. Glancy, *Corporal Knowledge: Early Christian Bodies* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2010), 112.

God—but in fact this is neither the manner nor the context in which the notion of an unaltered Birthgiver is propounded. Instead, given the focus on technicalities regarding the Birthgiver's body and the mixed understandings of physical virginity in the ancient world, this line of thinking appears to be less interested in any Christological argument and much more interested in—even obsessed with—the Birthgiver's private anatomy. One implication here may be that completely human childbirth experiences are lesser experiences and that such things as lochia, vaginal stretching, hymenal alterations, and messy afterbirth are tainting to the mother.

It is possible, however, to embrace the Birthgiver's typically human birthgiving experience and simultaneously accept Orthodoxy's dogma on the Birthgiver's virginal conception and the Church's teachings on her perpetual virginity—all while understanding her childbirth experience as particularly holy and special in light of her personal holiness and the uniqueness of the occasion. This stance is expressed by Thomas Hopko, writing in reference to the feast of the Presentation of the Lord in the Temple (when the Birthgiver and Joseph bring the young Christ child to the temple for the first time): "Mary did in fact come for purification as the law required. This means that her womb was opened and that the Christ Child was born from her in the manner in which all children are born. In this sense, although the Church insists that the Birthgiver remains forever a virgin, the only miracle in regard to the Lord's birth is the virginal conception. There is no teaching of any other sort of a miracle in regard to His birth; certainly no idea that He came forth from His mother without opening her womb."[29] In other words, the Birthgiver's labor and delivery of Jesus Christ were fully human experiences, complete with sensation and physical alteration.

Elsewhere Hopko makes a useful reference to the iconography of the Church that also points to a human birth experience by the Birthgiver: "The gospel claims that her womb was open (Luke 2:23), and the icons of the feast depict midwives washing the [presumably messy] newborn

[29] Hopko, *The Winter Pascha*, 174–75.

Christ Child. The Church opposes any attempt to deny, or even to minimize, the genuineness of Christ's humanity, which is officially defined by the fourth ecumenical council in Chalcedon as identical to our own."[30] In this case, Christ's humanity is related directly to his mother's authentic human experience of birthgiving. For Hopko, then, and for myself, the Birthgiver's status as a perpetual virgin is unchanged by her birthgiving, but her maternal body is very much altered in all the usual ways associated with giving birth.

The following maxim is attributed to several patristic thinkers: "What God has not assumed, he has not saved." Applying this formulation to the subject at hand, I conclude from this review of theology of the Birthgiver's birthgiving that her labor and delivery must have been typically human, both because of the Christological conclusion of Christ's full humanity and because of Christ's assumption of the birth experience. Christ assumed his own formation in his mother's uterus, the pulsing of that uterus as it prepared to bring him into the world, and the pressure of the trip down her birth canal and out into the cold air of the cave; he assumed it all.

The Birthgiver's Maternal Body in Hymns

Jesus Christ's assumption of the human birth experience is also reflected in the Church's hymnography about birth, which is no small matter given the preeminence of hymns in Orthodox life. Indeed, hymnography fills the usual weekly services; the Divine Liturgy (served Sundays and feast days), Vespers (served once or twice a week by most parishes), and Matins (served by some before Liturgy on Sundays). Some of this hymnography is static (i.e., repeated across similar services), and some of it rotates based on the liturgical calendar. Although a portion of each service is executed in spoken prayer, the larger part is sung or chanted in hymn form, most typically in an antiphonal call-and-response pattern, either between priest and parishioners or between parts of

[30] Ibid., 123, footnote 2.

the congregation. In addition to the liturgical hymns used on a daily or rotational basis, there is also a corpus of historical liturgical hymns not used frequently in liturgy yet viewed as an important part of Orthodoxy's body of theological work.

As this background makes clear, consideration of the Birthgiver does not end with doctrinal theology; rather, it continues to be contemplated in the hymnography of the Church. In fact, many of the Church's great theologians have also been poets and hymnographers, including Gregory of Nazianzus the Theologian and Saint Symeon the New Theologian, who account for two of only three who have been granted the title "Theologian" in Orthodox epithets. As noted earlier, Mariology does not quite constitute a separate or distinct field of scholarly study within Orthodox theology, and even as Orthodox Mariology continues to grow, it remains overshadowed by the volume of hymns referring to the Birthgiver. Elisabeth Behr-Sigel describes the inclusion of Marian theology in the liturgy by way of hymns: "Everything the Church believes about Mary is based on the dogma of Ephesus and set forth in the poetic and symbolic language of its liturgical hymns of praise and glorification. The function of this language is not, however, simply decorative and ornamental even though a certain rhetorical style can be detected. The liturgical language is beautiful, but its raison d'être is not aesthetical. This body of poetry is a vehicle for carrying a theological, theanthropological, and spiritual message which can be read at various levels."[31] Many of the Orthodox Church's hymns—both those in contemporary use, many of which have an ancient provenance, and those from other historical periods—are focused on the Birthgiver. The following example is one of the most ancient hymns still in regular Orthodox use, and it is directed to the Birthgiver:

> Under your compassion we take refuge, Theotokos; do not overlook our prayers in the midst of tribulation, but deliver us from danger, O only pure, only blessed one.[32]

[31] Behr-Sigel, *The Ministry of Women in the Church*, 190.
[32] "Small Compline," *The Great Horologion* (Boston, MA: Holy Transfiguration Monastery, 1997), 233.

Indeed, the Birthgiver ranks second only to Christ in number of times referenced in the hymnic life of the Orthodox Church.[33] She is mentioned a dozen times in the Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom—the liturgy used on most Sundays of the Church year—usually in the context of her birthgiving of Christ. Marian hymns are also found in festal services and in ancient hymnographic texts that explore the theology of the Birthgiver and her motherhood.[34] Festal hymnography about the Birthgiver's birthgiving largely relates to the appearance of Jesus Christ, as in this example from the Nativity Matins: "Christ is born, glorify him. Christ hath come from the heavens, receive him. Christ is on earth, elevate him."[35] In a more detailed manner, the Tropar (festal hymn) for the birth of the Birthgiver herself celebrates her integral role in the history of the world:

> Thy Nativity, O Theotokos Virgin, hath proclaimed joy to all the world,
> for from thee hath dawned the Sun of Righteousness,
> Christ our God, annulling the curse and bestowing the blessing,
> abolishing death and granting us life eternal.[36]

Here the Birthgiver is heralded as a harbinger of joy in her birthgiving, but in other Nativity hymns her birthgiving is described and encountered in terms of the pain or alterations that she is supposed, or supposed not, to have experienced in childbirth. One example is the hymnography from services around the Nativity of Christ found in the *Festal Menaion*, the compendium of both Slavic and Greek festal hymns of the major feasts used most often in parish churches. Because this material is concerned with exaltation of the wonderful and exceptional birth of Jesus Christ, it may

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[33] Pelikan, *Mary Through the Centuries*, 2.

[34] The Akathist hymn, composed in the fifth century by Saint Romanos the Melodist, and often used in both private and community settings, and therefore a first place to turn when looking for hymnography on the Birthgiver's birthgiving, notably skips over the birth experience, proceeding instead from Joseph's alarm about the Birthgiver's conception to the shepherds running to the cave because they have heard from the angels that the Son of God has been born. See: "Akathist to the Theotokos," OrthodoxWiki, December 8, 2014, http://orthodoxwiki.org/Akathist#Relating_to_the_Theotokos.

[35] "Christmas Matins," in *Divine Prayers and Services of the Catholic Orthodox Church of* Christ, ed. Seraphim Nassar (Englewood, NJ: Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America, 1979), 404.

[36] *The Horologion or Book of the Hours*, 2nd ed. (Brookline, MA: Holy Transfiguration Monastery, 1992), 262.

be no surprise to find that one hymn references the Birthgiver's pain-free birth ("Coming forth in the flesh, O Word coeternal with the Father, from a Mother who suffered no pangs of birth . . ."),[37] and that a few others describe her womb as unaltered (e.g., "A great and marvelous wonder has come to pass this day. A Virgin bears child, and her womb suffers no corruption. The Word is made flesh, yet ceases not to dwell with the Father)."[38] Most of the Nativity hymns that speak to the Birthgiver's birthgiving take a more general laudatory tone: "The Virgin was amazed as she beheld a conception past telling and a birth past utterance."[39] These hymns were composed by many theologian-poets, usually unnamed, throughout the centuries. For whatever reason, the lone hymn in the Nativity services composed by a woman, ninth-century Saint Kassiani, does not refer to the Birthgiver's birthgiving.[40]

A different reflection on the Birthgiver's experience of labor and delivery is found in the works of the fourth-century theologian-poet Saint Ephrem the Syrian. Ephrem was unusually concerned with topics pertaining to women in his hymns, some of which were explicitly written for female choirs—a remarkable occurrence in his time. This unusual focus of Ephrem's hymns is substantiated in a hymn written by another theologian-poet, Jacob of Serug, who composed after Ephrem (in the late fourth and early fifth centuries):

> The blessed Ephrem saw that the women were silent from praise
> And in his wisdom he decided it was right that they should sing out,
> So just as Moses gave timbrels to the young girls,
> Thus did this discerning man compose hymns for virgins.[41]

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[37] "Compline, Forefeast of the Nativity of Christ," in *The Festal Menaion*, trans. Mother Mary and Kallistos Ware (South Canaan, PA: Saint Tikhon's Seminary Press, 1990), 206.
[38] "Compline, The Nativity of the Flesh," in *The Festal Menaion*, trans. Mother Mary and Kallistos Ware (South Canaan, PA: Saint Tikhon's Seminary Press, 1990), 264.
[39] "Vespers, Forefeast of the Nativity of Christ," in *The Festal Menaion*, trans. Mother Mary and Kallistos Ware (South Canaan, PA: Saint Tikhon's Seminary Press, 1990), 199.
[40] Compline, The Nativity of the Flesh, in *The Festal Menaion*, 254.
[41] Jacob of Serug, quoted in Sebastian Brock, "Introduction," in *Hymns on Paradise*, trans. Sebastian Brock (Crestwood, NY: Saint Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1990), 23.

It is not surprising then, that this same "discerning man" composed many lines of verse about the Birthgiver's childbirth.

Ephrem's hymns, composed for the celebration of Christ's Nativity, focus primarily on the paradoxical and wonderful union of the human and the divine in Christ through his Incarnation, which in turn allows for the union of the human person with God: "The Deity imprinted Himself on humanity so that humanity might also be cut into the seal of the Deity."[42] Truly, in line with all Orthodox theology, Ephrem is enchanted with this paradox, and with many other paradoxes that he displays in these and other hymns, and his enchantment overflows into songs of praise. His theology is doxological.

Ephrem is also fascinated with the Birthgiver's role in the Incarnation; because of her assent to the Annunciation, the intense connection between the human and the divine is reestablished and ordered once more. Through her birthgiving, the Birthgiver enables a new era of the divine-human relationship. Many of his hymns consist of words that Ephrem places into the Birthgiver's mouth, thus giving her the reflective role of a participant-theologian. He also frequently reminds listeners that praise belongs to the Birthgiver because of her birthgiving of Jesus Christ: "Worthy of remembrance is the mother who gave birth to Him; / worthy of blessings is the bosom that bore Him."[43]

Moreover, being faithful to and perhaps particularly representative of Orthodoxy's reverence for paradox, Ephrem turns over in his mind the paradox of the Birthgiver as virgin and mother:

> The conception hinders our saying, "she is a virgin,"
> and [if we say] "a man's wife," the signs of virginity cry out.
> The body is one and does not allow us

[42] Ephrem the Syrian, "Hymns on Nativity," Hymn 1, in *Ephrem the Syrian, Hymns*, trans. Kathleen E. McVey (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1989), 74.
[43] Ephrem, "Hymns on Nativity," Hymn 2, in *Ephrem the Syrian, Hymns*, 77.

To say she is [both] virgin and a man's wife.
It was a wonder and a marvel for the vigorous [the ascetics],
It was a vexation and a torment for the learned.
The signs of virginity were hidden, but the breasts were full.
To Him be praises because of all.[44]

It seems that Ephrem throws up his hands in delighted confusion at the end of this stanza; he is glad for this paradox, which is both a marvel and a vexation. This tolerance for paradox—the ability to resist the temptation to side with one pole or another—is characteristic of Ephrem and further illustrates the Orthodox tradition's love of paradox.

Ephrem is also enchanted with the theme of birth, to which he returns frequently in the following hymn and in other hymns. He loves the complications and nuances involved in a human mother and a human birth experience for the one who gave birth to all; here, he puzzles through these relationships:

My Lord, Your birth became mother of all creatures,
Since, again, she labored and gave birth to humanity which gave birth to you.
[Humanity] gave birth to You physically; You begot her spiritually.
Your birth became Begetter of all.
Blessed is He who became young and restored youth to all![45]

Here the source of celebratory paradox is the fact, on the one hand, that the Birthgiver gave Jesus Christ humanity, yet, on the other hand, he also gave the Birthgiver her humanity and gave birth to all of humanity as creator of the world. In addressing this paradox, Ephrem stresses the physicality, the necessary materiality, of Jesus Christ's own birth and of his creative act. This stress on physicality is seen in Ephrem's portrayal of the Birthgiver's experience of giving birth to Jesus Christ. Ephrem creatively explores the notion of Jesus Christ as both unseen and seen in a passage that affirms the Birthgiver's authentic, painful birthgiving experience:

[44] Ephrem, "Hymns on Nativity," Hymn 28.5–6, in *Ephrem the Syrian, Hymns*, 215–16.
[45] Ephrem, "Hymns on Nativity," Hymn 23.5, in *Ephrem the Syrian, Hymns*, 188.

> The First-born entered the womb, but the pure one perceived Him not.
> He arose and emerged with birth-pangs, and the fair one felt Him.
> Glorious and hidden His entry, despised and visible His emergence,
> Since He is God at his entry, but human at His emergence."[46]

During the Annunciation, the presence of Jesus Christ is "unseen;" after his physical birth through his mother, he is "seen." Thus in Ephrem's vision of things, the Birthgiver experienced an exceptional conception but a typical human childbirth, which reflects her child's full humanity. Accordingly, rather than experiencing a magical delivery, the Birthgiver "felt him."

The Birthgiver's labor is also referred to in the hymns of Jacob Serug, another Syriac theologian-poet, who was quoted earlier in this chapter as heralding Ephrem's compositions for women. Writing more than a hundred years after Ephrem, Jacob is similarly enamored of the paradoxes found in the Birthgiver: "Virgin who without marital union marvelously became a mother, / a mother who remained without change in her virginity."[47] In this context—full of marvel at her simultaneous status as virgin and mother—he reckons with her childbirth experience: "While I seek to reckon her in the order of virgins, Behold the sound of birth pangs striking her comes to me."[48]

Like Ephrem, then, Jacob addresses the juxtaposition of real, physical childbirth—noted here as the "sound of birth pangs"—with the Birthgiver's virginity at the Annunciation. In this paradox, these two theologian-poets make sense of the mystery of Jesus Christ. Indeed, the paradox is necessary, both for their Christology and for their Mariology, and the Birthgiver's human labor and delivery are not only affirmed but also celebrated in their words: "Worthy of remembrance," "full breasts," "she labored and gave birth to humanity," "emerged with birth pangs,

[46] Ephrem, "Hymns on Nativity," Hymn 21.21, in *Ephrem the Syrian, Hymns*, 178.
[47] Jacob of Sarug, "Homily Concerning the Blessed Virgin Mother of God, Mary," 616, in *Jacob of Serug*, trans. Mary Hansburg (Crestwood, NY: Saint Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1998), 19.
[48] Jacob of Sarug, "Homily Concerning the Blessed Virgin Mother of God, Mary," 618, in *Jacob of Serug*, 21.

"the fair one felt him," "human at his emergence," "the sound of birth pangs striking her." Ephrem and Jacob perceive her birth experience—pain and all—as a beauty and a wonder. They are both dedicated to the Incarnation, the complete embrace of humanity by the divine, and they see the true humanity of Jesus Christ as intimately bound to the Birthgiver's birthgiving. This vision illustrates Christ's true experience of childbirth and, therefore, his true sanctification of it, including its sensation, effort, and effects.

Maternal Kinship: Contemplation

Nativity of Christ, twenty-first century, United States, Eileen McGuckin[49]

Nativity of Christ, twenty-first century, United States, Tom Clark[50]

[49] *Nativity of Christ*, Eileen McGuckin, 2014, www.sgtt.org.
[50] *Nativity*, Tom Clark, 2014, http://www.tomclarkicons.com.

Because icons, like hymns, are intimately connected to the theology and life of the Church, it is profitable to consider not only verbal but also visual depictions of birthgiving. The work of iconographers is, in the words of a group of nuns preparing a book about the life of the Birthgiver, "bound up closely with the Church's worship; they are servants of a liturgical tradition."[51] With this appreciative perspective in mind, and having considered the words of ancient theologian-poets, I now turn to the theology of icons having to do with birthgiving. I focus on two icons of the Nativity—that is, the birthgiving of Jesus Christ by the Birthgiver.

The Nativity icon has an ancient provenance. Like the Annunciation icon, it was produced on pilgrims' ampullae in the fifth century and may also have been represented earlier.[52] A prototypical icon type of the Nativity is reproduced here by Eileen McGuckin's *Nativity*. Even though it is contemporary, its style and content are ancient, and it represents the most frequently used composition of elements. It depicts the setting just after the birth of Jesus Christ, thus showing not the birth itself but its immediate aftermath. [53] This approach resembles typical depictions of the Resurrection, which illustrate not what happened at the moment of the Resurrection but what followed: the female disciples coming to find an empty tomb.

McGuckin's *Nativity* also depicts details from the Gospel birth narratives: the magi, the shepherds, the angels, the swaddling clothes, and the manger. Two other elements, the ox and the ass, are positioned closer to Jesus Christ than any human or angel and are mentioned not in the Gospels but in the book of Isaiah: "The ox knows its master and the donkey its master's crib" (Isa. 1:3 SAAS). These elements affirm a basic tenet of the Feast of the Nativity—that every part of the world is aware of the significance of this birth. As Leonid Ouspensky notes, "All of creation takes

[51] *The Life of the Virgin Mary, the Theotokos*, xi.
[52] Leonid Ouspensky, *The Meaning of Icons* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1999), 157.
[53] Though not graphic by any means, icons of the Nativity of the Birthgiver—of Anna's birthgiving of Mary—often, in contrast to the Nativity of Christ icons, show Anna straining in childbirth, albeit chastely covered by her dress and blankets.

part in the event and round the Divine Child, newly born, we see representatives of the whole created world, each rendering his fitting service, or as the Church says—each giving thanks in his own way."[54]

Those unfamiliar with the *Protoevangelium of James* or associated traditions might be puzzled by the two women shown in typical Nativity icons at the viewer's lower right: the midwife and Salome. Another odd detail is that of Joseph and his companion in the lower left corner. The curiosity here hinges on the presence not of Joseph—he is, after all, included in the birth narratives in the Gospels—but of his companion: an old, bent-over, bearded man, who represents the devil. Although the *Protoevangelium* does not mention this character, it does allude multiple times to Joseph's struggle to accept the pregnancy of his betrothed (which is also addressed in Matt. 1:18–21). Over time, this aspect of the narrative was given visual representation in the iconographic detail of Joseph's companion. Ouspensky explains that the inclusion of Joseph and the devil likely represents, in a suggestive manner, misplaced doubt concerning the virginal conception of the Birthgiver.[55]

This Nativity icon type draws the viewer's gaze directly to the Birthgiver. She is central, often disproportionately large, and typically positioned on a bright red or white blanket (a traditional bedroll for travelers in the ancient world). Even though the Nativity feast celebrates the arrival of God in the form of a baby, the Birthgiver herself is shown front and center in the icon. This is no accident. As Ouspensky writes, "Looking at the icon of the Nativity of Christ, the first thing that draws our attention is the position of the Mother of God and the place she occupies. In this 'festival of re-creation,' she is 'the renewal of all born on earth', the new Eve. As the first Eve became mother of all living people, so the new Eve became the Mother of all renewed mankind,

[54] Ouspensky, *The Meaning of Icons*, 157.
[55] Ibid., 160.

deified through the Incarnation of the Son of God."[56] Thus the Birthgiver is central to the icon not just because of her important role in Christ's becoming incarnate, but also because of her pivotal role for all of creation. As a *mother*, the Birthgiver is the agent for a cosmic rebirth. Thus her centrality in McGuckin's icon of the *Nativity*, as is the case for most Nativity icons, is both intentional and appropriate.

The Birthgiver's importance in the *Nativity* icon type illustrates that the Incarnation is about the rebirth of all of creation, an act that is accomplished through motherhood. Nothing escapes these sanctifying waters of childbirth that flooded in a cave, in the darkness, two thousand years ago. Of course, at the time of Christ's birth, the Crucifixion and the Resurrection have yet to come; therefore, the work has yet to be fully accomplished. But Orthodoxy understands the Incarnation as an event suffused with grace and brimming with hope for the changes to come.

In addition to the Birthgiver's positioning in the Nativity icon type, other significant features include her posture and her gaze. In fact, a great deal of meaning is attributed to the Birthgiver's posture in icons of the Nativity. Typically, the ones in which she reclines off to the side—as in the McGuckin example shown here—are described as showing her typical human childbirth experience; exhausted, she is now resting. In contrast, in the icons in which she is shown upright as in the Clark *Nativity*, she is understood to be unperturbed by childbirth, having been unaffected by the experience of labor and delivery. Ouspensky defends these dichotomous ways of depicting the Birthgiver, saying that, "the posture of the Mother of God is always full of deep meaning and connected with dogmatic problems, which have arisen at different times or places."[57]

Indeed, as I have indicated in previous chapters, icons of the Birthgiver have often been fashioned or affirmed in reference to doctrinal or dogmatic points. Yet here, the two differing

[56] Ibid., 159.
[57] Ibid., 159.

approaches—reclined authentic human birthgiving versus upright divine-style birth—do not entirely make sense, due to the presence in the more ancient Nativity icon type of the midwife and Salome from the *Protoevangelium*. In this icon type, represented by the McGuckin *Nativity*, they appear in the viewer's lower right, washing or preparing to wash the Christ child. As seen earlier in my discussion of virginity in childbirth, their presence is strongly associated with the tradition that the Birthgiver experienced a special childbirth that left her body unscathed. It is incongruous, then, for this detail to appear on an icon in which the Birthgiver is typically understood to be resting after the fatigue of childbirth. Ouspensky writes, "This scene [of Salome and the midwife washing the Christ child] from everyday life shows clearly that Child is like any other new-born babe and is subject to the natural requirements of human nature."[58] It is odd to include the "poster women" for the Birthgiver's pain-free, unscathed birth in a composition that purportedly references her recovery from the childbirth experience. (On the other hand, the fact that the Birthgiver needed a midwife—or at least that Joseph thought she did—might in itself suggest that her birthgiving experience involved struggle and therefore was not free of pain.)

An analysis of Nativity icons is complicated further by the fact that, even though the McGuckin *Nativity* represents the dominant depiction of the Nativity, variants showing an upright Birthgiver, like the Clark *Nativity*, have ancient precedent and are not entirely uncommon.[59] Like Ouspensky, the nuns of the Holy Apostles Convent wish to make a distinction between these two Nativity types clear by claiming that the upright Birthgiver is a new, Western-influenced innovation: "In some icons we see the Virgin-Mother half-sitting or we may see her looking away from her child, as though pondering His miraculous appearance. Her gesture and attitude also bespeak her perplexity at the virgin birth, yet she kept those things in her heart. Later depictions,

[58] Ibid., 160.
[59] In fact, they are comparatively more common among expressions of the Nativity than the *Ustyug* type is among expressions of the Annunciation reviewed in the preceding chapter.

of Western origin, show her kneeling over her Son; thus also indicating a painless delivery and the unneeded service of a midwife to effect delivery."[60] It is true that Western Christian images of the Nativity skew toward a lively, almost perky Birthgiver, especially after the Renaissance, but this positioning of the Birthgiver is also consistently present throughout the Orthodox tradition, as represented.

In addition to questions raised by the Birthgiver's posture in Nativity icons, the composition of these icons involves another theologically significant component: her gaze. In the more ancient Nativity icon, such as McGuckin's *Nativity*, the Birthgiver looks off into the distance, away from her son. The theological meaning of this gaze has prompted much speculation.[61] For example, contemporary Orthodox scholar Michael Evdokimov suggests that "even though she is mother, she turns away from her child to welcome us all."[62] Similarly, Michel Quenot notes that "her gaze is focused beyond the present without resting on her Son, as a mother's gaze often does, [thus] giving the scene a prophetic quality."[63] Perhaps there is indeed a prophetic quality to her look; though the Birthgiver has yet to hear the words of Simeon, who will tell her to expect a piercing of her own soul, perhaps she senses what is to come (Luke 2:34–35).[64]

In Evdokimov's view, the Birthgiver contemplates the situation, which fits with the Lucan narrative in which the Birthgiver, in the midst of a busy schedule of postpartum visitation by shepherds and magi, "kept all these things and pondered them in her heart" (Luke 2:19 NKJV). This interpretation gains validity when the ancient icon type of the Nativity is compared with a variant

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[60] *The Life of the Virgin Mary, the Theotokos,* 175.
[61] The Birthgiver's gaze differs markedly from Anna's gaze in the Nativity of the Theotokos icons, in which Anna looks toward her newborn daughter.
[62] Michael Evdokimov, *Light from the East* (Boston, MA: Paulist Press, 2004), 282.
[63] Quenot, *The Resurrection and the Icon* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1997), 127.
[64] Another interpretation is offered by Ouspensky, who writes the following about a subset of icons in which the Birthgiver looks at Joseph: "She looks at Joseph as if she were expressing by this look compassion for his state. In this the icon teaches a tolerant and compassionate attitude towards human unbelief and doubt." (Ouspensky, *The Meaning of Icons*, 160.) Yet the Birthgiver looks at Joseph in only some of the Nativity icons; more typically, she looks off into the distance.

tradition, as exemplified earlier in Clark's *Nativity*, in which the Birthgiver gazes directly at her son. In this version, the new mother looks right at her newborn child, encountering him. On one hand, this depiction is fitting as it conveys the significance of their kinship. On the other hand, however, this stance and gaze provide no sense of the Birthgiver's contemplation of the deeper mysteries of the Nativity. In contrast, in the ancient Nativity icons, the Birthgiver looks away from her son, perhaps encountering the mystery of it all. Of course, the Birthgiver could ponder such matters while gazing at the child, but she is shown looking away from Christ, and gazing wistfully into the distance, in order to convey clearly to the viewer that she is engaged in such contemplation.

Despite the power of this approach—and the fact that the majority of Nativity icons preceding contemporary times show the Birthgiver's gaze averted from her infant—there now appears to be a trend, perhaps especially in the United States, to show the Birthgiver gazing directly at Christ.[65] A typical example can be seen in Clark's *Nativity*. Perhaps moderns *want* to see the Birthgiver focused on the Christ child; indeed, all of the theologians quoted earlier, as well as several other modern writers on icons, seem surprised to see the Birthgiver gazing elsewhere, and they feel prompted to explain why she is shown doing so. Ouspensky rightly observes that the posture of the Birthgiver may vary according to the needs of the faithful in a given time and place: "Alterations of [the Birthgiver's] posture emphasize, according to need, either the Divine or the human nature of the Savior."[66] Perhaps what is desired in the twenty-first century is an example of maternal connection—of personal kinship between the Birthgiver and Christ—which is well represented in icons showing the Birthgiver upright and engaged with her son through both her posture and her gaze.

[65] This generalization is based on a summary of images available on the web and on personal knowledge of icons in church settings painted in the last few decades.
[66] Ouspensky, *The Meaning of Icons*, 159.

Even in light of the intriguing and theologically legitimate trend of an upright Birthgiver, I see the theological and pastoral need for both types of Nativity icon. The variant with upright posture is needed because it affirms a connection between mother and child. In these images, the Birthgiver is obviously engaged with her son, showing him maternal attention, and, in icons that depict her as holding or touching him, providing him with maternal care. In contrast, for some viewers, the Birthgiver in a the more ancient reclined position may seem distant from her son, or disengaged, whereas the variants with upright posture leave no doubt about the familial connection and warmth between the two figures. This is an encouraging approach; in its depiction of the connection between mother and child, it invites the faithful to ignite that same connection to the child or to the mother. The Birthgiver and Jesus Christ are both shown as approachable and loveable—an important visual point to make to the faithful of the twenty-first century, in which the Birthgiver's approachability is uncertain in some circles.

At the same time, I see the need for the prototypical Nativity icon, which also affirms a connection between mother and child but in a different manner. Whereas the upright variant visibly imparts the direct connection between mother and son—even in this exceptional pair—the prototypical icon with the relaxed posture and averted gaze provides a reminder of the role of contemplation in motherhood. Indeed, Orthodox theology holds an understanding of the heart—in contrast to the mind—as the locus of connection with God. As Archimandrite Meletios Webber writes, "The heart is . . . at every moment, accepting of the reality God gives in that moment. . . . It begins with an awareness of its relationship with the rest of creation (and everything and everyone in it);" furthermore, "the heart is capable of constant awareness of God, and we can see that awareness, albeit in a weakened state, whenever we quiet the mind long enough to hear the

silence."[67] The Birthgiver, immediately after her birthgiving experience, is capable of this "constant awareness of God," not only because she has direct experience with him but also because she dedicates the time to cultivate that awareness through contemplation: She quiets her mind "long enough to hear the silence."

The Birthgiver's pausing to ponder—in the midst of the postpartum fatigue that follows the flurry of labor and delivery—provides a model for mothers to emulate. Of all the offices in life, raising children is one of the most physically and spiritually intense, and, like the Birthgiver, mothers need to pause and ponder. This kind of pause differs from what is often referred to today as "me time"—time spent at leisure doing nonmaternal things. Though that sort of time may also be desired or needed by mothers, the time taken by the Birthgiver for contemplation, in Webber's phrase, is "accepting of the reality God gives in that moment." Such time for pondering allows mothers to connect with God in their hearts, which in turn connects their mothering to their innermost self and allows them to relate to their children authentically and meaningfully. Though the physical experience of birthgiving can attune one to God, contemplation does as well. Mothers can, like the Birthgiver, dedicate time to contemplation, which facilitates awareness of both self and God. This observation is one of many offered in this theology of motherhood that is not exclusive to motherhood; rather, all people are called to, and benefit from, this sort of pondering in their hearts.

Conclusions and Possibilities

The nature of the Birthgiver's experience of birthgiving has been the subject of varied analysis in Orthodoxy. For some, in the words of Alexander Schmemann, "the heart of the Orthodox Christian East's devotion, contemplation, and joyful delight in Mary has always been her

[67] Meletios Webber, *Bread and Water, Wine and Oil* (Ben Lomond, CA: Conciliar Press, 2007), 25.

Motherhood, her flesh and blood connection to Jesus Christ. The East rejoices that the human role in the divine plan is pivotal."[68] As much as I like this characterization—and as much as it might further this project—I am not certain that it is the case. In fact, the Birthgiver's virginity has been vigorously employed as a defense of consecrated virginity, and her motherhood has often been ignored beyond its doctrinal role in establishing the full humanity of Christ.

As noted earlier, the vocation of consecrated virginity gave Christian women their first opportunity for a noble life other than that of mother or householder. This opportunity provided women with an alternative path that they could honorably choose for themselves. In this way, consecrated virginity was, and should be, understood as a supremely countercultural opportunity for women provided by early Christianity. Unfortunately, as this new opportunity for virginity as a vocation was defended and propounded, the productive tension between virgin and mother was lost; instead, for both the Birthgiver and more mundane women, virginity was upheld as the higher pole of the paradox.

Various theologians of the early Church became deeply invested in the Birthgiver's virginity because it served as a pillar of their defense of virginity as the superior mode of Christian life. As one consequence of this line of thinking, consecrated virginity was valorized at the expense of marriage and parenthood, which led to a negative view of the human body and sexuality. As Jaroslav Pelikan writes, "Christian asceticism expressed itself in a rejection of the body that appeared to deny that God has created it, and therefore in a revulsion at sexuality that equated it with immorality."[69] This sort of thinking is helpful neither to mothers nor to a theology of motherhood—a problem that has been lamented by Elisabeth Behr-Sigel: "In the atmosphere of a monastic spirituality in which ascetical motivations predominate, in which sex, and especially

[68] Schmemann, *The Virgin Mary*, 22.
[69] Pelikan, *Mary Through the Centuries*, 121.

woman, was often seen as synonymous with sin, the piety surrounding the Birthgiver has not always escaped the temptation of 'angelism.' In relation to the Birthgiver, this 'angelism' seems to be a real heresy that is closely related to Christological Docetism. The result is that the Mother of God is radically separated from ordinary women who can neither recognize themselves in her nor be recognized in her."[70] The angelism to which Behr-Sigel refers is distinct from the transfiguration of the human person described in chapter 2. Whereas the possibility of transfiguration involves the physical body and the soul transforming together into completeness, the notion of angelism disregards the body and aims to escape it.

Over time, such angelism was even extended beyond the purview of the Birthgiver's birthgiving of Christ and into her own mother's birthgiving of her. For example, Saint Andrew of Crete's eighth-century writings suggest the presence of Christians who viewed the Birthgiver's own birth as either a virgin one or at least an abnormal one (though Saint Andrew himself did not hold this view).[71] This line of thinking was bolstered in the fourteenth century by Saint Gregory of Palamas, who asked, "She [the Birthgiver] alone dwelt in the Holy of Holies, and she alone became the abode of the Creator of the natural order, so how could nature dare profane the womb in which she rested, and from which she came forth?"[72] Descendent strands of this line of thinking continue to this day.

Angelism of the Birthgiver is countered by an understanding—aligned Tertullian's thoughts on the body, Hopko's vision of the Birthgiver, and Ephrem the Syrian's hymns—that envisions the Birthgiver's labor and delivery of Christ as fully and completely human—and therefore including pain (however pain might be perceived), afterbirth, lochia, and general messiness. Of course, in

[70] Behr-Sigel, *The Ministry of Women in the Church*, 208.
[71] Mary B. Cunningham, "'All-Holy Infant': Byzantine and Western Views on the Conception of the Virgin Mary," *St Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 50, nos. 1–2 (2006): 127–48.
[72] Gregory of Palamas, "On the Nativity of the Mother of God," in *Mary the Mother of God: Sermons by Saint Gregory of Palamas*, ed. Christopher Veniamin (South Canaan, PA: Mount Thabor, 2005), 4.

some sense, the Birthgiver's birthgiving can never been understood as typical, because *she gave birth to God*. But an understanding of her birthgiving as human—not extraterrestrial—preserves Christ's humanity as well as her own, demonstrates that Jesus Christ clearly blessed childbirth through his experience of his own birth, and, in turn, results in a more accessible Birthgiver for all women. Moreover, Orthodoxy has room to embrace this understanding of the Birthgiver's maternal experience, notwithstanding different understandings found in festal hymns and patristic thought. As Behr-Sigel writes, "Everything that is said about Mary in the liturgical prayers of Byzantine rite Churches is organically tied to this fact [that Mary is Theotokos] while at the same time leaving a great freedom to persons and communities to interpret and appropriate the mystery according to times and places."[73]

This freedom includes the opportunity to more fully investigate and embrace the Birthgiver's maternal body. There is an ancient Christian tradition of giving a woman in labor the keys to the church door, so that she can hold them in her efforts to open her womb.[74] In additional to the tradition's powerful ecclesiological symbolism, it also provides a glimpse of the church's embrace of the maternal body, of support for the mother in labor, and of the translation of the mystery of the Birthgiver's birthgiving into more quotidian experience. This embrace of the maternal body in birthgiving is also present—in embryonic form, so to speak—in Orthodoxy, and it can be highlighted and developed so that it is clear to all mothers, to all women, to all faithful.

In chapter 2, I noted the dearth of Orthodox prayers for the pre-conceptive state of motherhood. However, the tradition does offer an ancient prayer, quoted earlier and repeated here, that might well serve as a prayer for women during childbirth:

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[73] Behr-Sigel, *The Ministry of Women in the Church*, 184.
[74] Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *Motherprayer* (New York, NY: Riverhead Books, 1995), 20, 49. Similarly, midwives in Chekhov's story "The Name Day Party" unlock all the doors in the house and ask the priest to unlock the doors to the altar. The origins of this practice are unclear; it may be a pagan practice that was Christianized over time.

> Under your compassion we take refuge, Theotokos; do not overlook our prayers in the midst of tribulation, but deliver us from danger, O only pure, only blessed one.[75]

This could be the prayer of one mother to the Mother, the Birthgiver, asking for refuge from the hardships of labor and delivery. This particular access to the Birthgiver is granted through an acceptance of her shared, physical birthgiving experience.

Another point of access to the Birthgiver is found in the prospect of joining her in contemplation of motherhood. When she takes that moment to contemplate her own motherhood in Luke 2:19, it comes as a break in the rapid-fire narrative of the birth of Christ. Rather than responding to the hustle and bustle after giving birth, including the presence of shepherd visitors, the Birthgiver reserves a moment for quiet. Her pondering contrasts with the shepherds' reactions: "Now when they had seen Him, they made widely known the saying which was told them concerning this Child. And all those who heard it marveled at those things which were told them by the shepherds" (Luke 2:17–18 NKJV). In short, the shepherds run and tell everyone the good news—a reaction that seems quite natural and for which they are not faulted. The Birthgiver, on the other hand, remains motionless and silent, contemplating the wonder; she heeds the words of the Psalmist: "Be still, and know that I am God" (Ps. 45(46):11 SAAS). In so doing, she provides an imitable example of maternal contemplation.

This contemplation radiates beyond the particular mother involved, and it can be emulated by all persons. Indeed, the Birthgiver has always served as a model not only for women and mothers but also for all of humanity. As Behr-Sigel observes, "in the Orthodox tradition, . . . theologians and the simple faithful contemplate in her the vision of the new humanity. She is the

[75] "Small Compline," *The Great Horologion*, 233.

archetype and the guide of those men and women who aspire to give thanksgiving to Christ in their hearts and who ask her to intercede for them and to call on the gift of the Holy Spirit."[76]

This chapter focuses on the Birthgiver's experience of childbirth and considers the understandings of it expressed in doctrine, hymns, and icons. It also offers a view of her deeply physical, authentic birthgiving experience, as well as her gift of contemplation, which anchors her in kinship to her son and to all others around her. In conclusion, I wish to emphasize the significant consequence of the Birthgiver's authentic birthgiving experience: Christ experienced it all himself, thereby sanctifying and glorifying childbirth, both for his mother and for all mothers.

[76] Behr-Sigel, *The Ministry of Women in the Church*, 207.

Chapter 5: Postpartum

Introduction

The postpartum period is a messy time, during which the new mother is recovering from the fatigue and strain of childbirth, dealing with lochia, and figuring out how to feed her baby—whether through leaky, sore nipples or through the preparation of bottle after bottle of stain-inducing formula. Indeed, the postpartum body can rightly be understood as a new body, and all sorts of changes may appear: wider hips, increased shoe size, stretch marks and thinner skin on the abdomen, breasts with a new shape and texture, and other alterations. As with all stages of childbearing, there is no getting around the intense physicality of this period of motherhood. Yet, as dominant as the physical transformation may be, it is not the only significant aspect of the postpartum time. This period is also emotionally intense, as the mother experiences new and sometimes hormone-triggered emotions about her child, her husband, and herself. Meanwhile, in the spiritual realm, the new mother continues to form her child by prayer and to immerse herself in the new trinity of relationship between herself, her husband, and their child (or children).

The new mother is not, of course, alone as she becomes accustomed to her altered body; she has a newborn to care for. This care is also intensely physical, and intimately so. A mother (often with help from her husband and other family members) spends hours each day holding, feeding, bathing, wiping, caressing, burping, changing, and soothing her newborn. She likely does all of this on little sleep and while addled by the intensity of the situation. This phase occurs in adoptive motherhood as well; even though the journey and the timing are different in adoption, the task of physically caring for one's child for the first time is no less intense, and no less significant.

A mother experiences postpartum changes not just after her first birthgiving but after every birthgiving. I was altered—physically and spiritually—by all three of my pregnancies. The

postpartum period following the birth of my firstborn was characterized by my feelings of crazy love combined with ineptitude; he was the first newborn I had ever held. The time after the birth of my second child found me with greater confidence—I knew how to nurse, how to change a diaper, and so on—but feeling dominated by the juggling act of keeping a two-and-a-half-year-old happy while meeting the needs of a newborn. The time after my triplets were born was characterized by relentless care and effort on the part of my husband and our older children. I mostly sat on the couch and traded off nursing babies throughout the day.

There is much that I do not remember from the fog of early motherhood, but I clearly remember each child's churching. This is the rite celebrated in Orthodoxy when a mother comes to church with her newborn for the first time after childbirth, and it provides the focus for this chapter. Each of my children's churchings felt like a point of transition between the intensity of the early weeks of motherhood and a less intense, though perhaps no less arduous, era of established motherhood.

The Churching rite is one of two main resources that the Orthodox Church offers during the postpartum time.[1] The second rite, which actually occurs prior to Churching, is a small set of prayers said by the priest when he visits the family soon after the birth of a child. These two postpartum rites are critically important because they offer the mother a framework for understanding mothering in the context of the Orthodox Church. They also constitute the most personal and focused meditations on motherhood found in the Orthodox liturgical tradition.

Even so, not everything about these rites is consonant with Orthodoxy's broader teaching about, and approach to, motherhood as seen in other contexts, including those reviewed in the

[1] Two other rites could also be labeled as "postpartum:" the "Prayer at the Naming of a Child on the Eighth Day of Birth," which I do not include here as a resource for a theology of motherhood because it is so focused on the child, and the "Prayer for a Woman When She Has Miscarried/Aborted an Infant," which I do not include here because it lacks the focus on the mother's self-perception *as* a mother that is intimated in the First Day and Churching rites (I do discuss changes happening to this rite later in the chapter).

preceding chapters of this project. For instance, although the homiletic, iconographic, and hymnographic traditions offer a positive vision of marital sexuality and of the maternal body in pregnancy and childbirth, they also communicate an association between childbirth and impurity. This connection is surprising for two reasons. First, in Orthodoxy, impurity is usually associated with intentional or identifiable sin. This sort of impurity is referenced often in the prayers of the Church, but it is understood as being connected to a willful choice of sin—not to a natural biological process such as childbirth. Second, because the coming of Christ is thought—in light of the teachings of Christ and the early Church—to have recast notions of impurity from the body into the sphere of the conscience, Orthodoxy usually understands impurity not primarily as a *bodily* state but rather as a state of the conscience.

In this chapter, I review the history and theology behind these two rites and show that the link between their development and their current practice is neither unbroken nor completely sound. I also make the case that these rites in their current form are harmful to women, because they frame women's experiences of motherhood with the sentiment that the childbearing process has rendered them impure and unclean. I then encounter the ways in which the rites are used in contemporary American practice and propose some avenues for change. Though I have suggested changes in Orthodox practices related to motherhood in past chapters, here I propose changes in the Church's rites, which, in an Orthodox context, is a bolder proposition. At the same time, it also constitutes a change in the opposite direction. In other chapters, I have encouraged an expansion or broadening of the scope of theological reflection on motherhood by highlighting specific resources that have, at times, been underemphasized or underappreciated. In this case, I argue for the excision or revision of certain aspects of particular rites. This recommendation is made circumspectly, given my immense respect for liturgical tradition, but also urgently, given my

confidence that these rites as currently construed are not a wholesome manifestation of that tradition.

In this chapter I also examine an icon titled *Presentation of the Theotokos in the Temple*, which depicts the moment when Joachim and Anna bring the Birthgiver to the temple for the first time. This icon offers a vision of the Orthodox Church's hospitality, which could provide the grounding for a fresh articulation of the Church's postpartum rites in order to make real its welcome of the new mother and child—a welcome that echoes the mother's own embodied hospitality toward her new daughter or son. I conclude the chapter with the continued assertion that change can and should come to these rites and to the practices surrounding them, as well as suggestions regarding other rites that could be crafted to meet the theological needs of mothers and families.

Maternal Body: Impurity

My turn to the postpartum rites for theological information about motherhood is a sensible one because of Orthodoxy's deeply liturgical theology. Orthodoxy's liturgy—understood in the broadest sense as the experience and celebration of all of its communal rites and prayers—is central to its theology and its lived experience. Liturgy informs, explains, and celebrates, the truth of Orthodox life. The Divine Liturgy offers an understanding of salvation history and of the Eucharist; the baptismal liturgy indicates what it means to become a Christian, to "put on" Christ; and, particularly pertinent to this chapter, the two postpartum rites present an understanding of childbirth and motherhood. The question at issue, however, is whether the understanding presented in the rites as currently practiced accords with the larger Orthodox understanding of childbirth and motherhood.

Orthodox rites indicate various understandings of components of Christian life, but they are not confined to didactic and ritualistic purposes. As Alexander Schmemann explains the Greek

root of the word *liturgy* (*leitourgia*), "it meant an action by which a group of people became something corporately which they had not been as a mere collection of individuals. . . . Therefore the Church testimony to itself is a *leitourgia*, a ministry, a calling to act in this world after the fashion of Christ, to bear witness to him and to his kingdom."[2] Thus the rites of the Church simultaneously elucidate the truth of Christian experience and unite and lift up the corporate body of the Church. This is the case for Sunday Divine Liturgy, and it is *ideally* the case also for the rites surrounding motherhood.

Early motherhood in the Orthodox world is bookended by the two aforementioned rites that speak directly to both mother and child. Both are found in the compendium of prayers for a parish priest known as *The Great Book of Needs*.[3] "The Prayers on the First Day After a Woman Has Given Birth to a Child" (more commonly called First Day) are typically prayed on the day of childbirth by the priest, who visits the mother in the hospital or at her home.[4] The second of these rites, the "Prayer for a Woman on the Fortieth Day of Childbirth" (more commonly known as Churching) follows forty or so days later and takes place at church, in the presence of the whole community. I refer to these two rites collectively as the postpartum rites, though much of my commentary about them focuses on Churching because it is longer and more theologically dense, has a longer ritual history, and is practiced more frequently in contemporary Orthodox settings. These two rites are principal to a woman's initial experience of motherhood as an Orthodox Christian. In fact, they are often the first things that she hears about motherhood from her Church; unfortunately, due to the dearth of theological thought and pastoral guidance about motherhood, they are just as often the last.

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[2] Alexander Schmemann, *For the Life of the World* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1988), 25.
[3] *The Great Book of Needs* is known as the *Euchologion* in Greek circles and as the *Trebnink* in Slavic, and it is often shortened in English to just *The Book of Needs*. I use the English translation of this volume that is most often used in Slavic parishes: *The Great Book of Needs*, vol. 1 (South Canaan, PA: St. Tikhon's Seminary Press, 2000).
[4] Both rites are included in full in the appendix.

The postpartum rites include prayers for the physical preservation of the mother and child, and they affirm the human person in general if not the maternal body in particular. The mercifully short First Day—the Church understands that the period immediately after childbirth is no time for prolix prose—contains these lines: "O Master, Lord Almighty, Who healest every sickness and every weakness: Do Thou Thyself heal also this Thy handmaid, *Name*, who today has given birth, and raise her from the bed on which she lies. . . . Preserve her and this child which she has borne."[5] Implicit in these prayers is the reality that the woman may in fact not "rise from her bed again" and that the new child may in fact not "be preserved."[6] Throughout nearly all of human history, maternal and infant demise have been woefully common, especially during the first day after birth, and clearly this fact was held in mind by those who composed these rites.[7] It is only in the last few decades, and only in the wealthiest nations, that maternal and infant mortality and morbidity rates have been reduced and that childbirth has come to be perceived as an intrinsically safe process. Even today, even in the developed world, and even in the best of circumstances and with the greatest resources, pregnancy and childbirth are still uncertain times, during which no outcome is guaranteed. These rites appropriately acknowledge this uncertainty.

The parts of these rites that speak directly to the maternal body make a putative link between childbirth and impurity. In the First Day prayers, the priest comes to the mother soon after childbirth, and the connection between childbirth and impurity is mentioned the moment he cracks the spine of *The Great Book of Needs* for the first prayer: "According to the words of the

[5] "Prayers on the First Day After a Woman Has Given Birth to a Child," *The Great Book of Needs*, 3.
[6] The possibility of a tragic outcome is also accounted for in the Churching rite, which includes instructions for adapting the rite if the woman returns to church alone because the infant has not survived; conversely, in the event of maternal death, the child-centered part of the rite is still carried out.
[7] In some parts of the world, the neonatal mortality rate (the percentage of infants who die before 28 days of age) is still as high as one in twenty. See the World Bank's data on childbirth-related mortality: "Mortality rate, neonatal (per 1,000 live births)," 2014, http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SH.DYN.NMRT.

Prophet David, in sins were we conceived, and all are defiled before Thee."[8] The second prayer includes requests regarding the mother and her body: "Purify her from uncleanness" and "cleanse her from bodily uncleanness and the various afflictions of her womb." The third prayer elaborates: ". . . and forgive this, Thy handmaid, *Name*, and the whole household into which this infant has been born, and all who have touched her, and all here present; forgive all of them, inasmuch as Thou art a Good God and the Lover of Mankind."[9]

Some forty days later, the Churching rite takes place at church. Its first references to the status of the mother's purity come in the stage directions, or rubrics, at the beginning of the rite: "And the child (if alive) is borne by the mother, who, already being cleansed and washed, stands before the (western) entrance."[10] The notion of purity is also addressed in the first prayer delivered by the priest: "Thou has hast saved this Thy servant, *Name*, by Thy will. Purify her, therefore, from every sin and from every defilement as she now draws near to Thy holy church; and let her be counted worthy to partake, uncondemned, of Thy Holy Mysteries."[11] This prayer and others in the Churching rite clearly imply that the act of childbirth has left the mother in need of purification from both "sin" and "every defilement" and therefore unworthy of communion. The priest then turns back to the mother and asks, "O Lord our God, Who didst come for the salvation of the human race, come also upon Thy servant, *Name*, and count her worthy, through the prayers of Thine honorable Priest, of entrance into the temple of Thy Glory. Wash away her bodily and spiritual uncleanness, in the completion of the forty days. Make her worthy also of the communion of Thy precious Body and Blood."[12] Again, the woman is perceived to be physically and spiritually unclean because of childbirth and therefore unworthy of the Eucharist. This prayer concludes the

[8] "Prayers on the First Day After a Woman Has Given Birth to a Child," *The Great Book of Needs*, 3–5.
[9] Ibid., 3–5.
[10] "Prayers for a Woman on the Fortieth Day of Childbirth," *The Great Book of Needs*, 10.
[11] Ibid., 10–11.
[12] Ibid., 12.

part of the rite pertaining to the mother, and the remainder focuses on the child's reception into the Church.

These rites constitute an anomaly in Orthodoxy's understanding of motherhood. In contrast to the dignified depiction of Anna and Joachim coming together for conjugal union as seen in chapter 2, here an association is made between childbirth and impurity that, in some explanations, can be traced back to an association between marital sexuality and impurity. Similarly, in contrast to the celebration of the maternal form shown in the *Ustyug Annunciation* icon and in depictions of Elizabeth and the Birthgiver in their pregnancies as noted in chapter 3, here a *dis*association is made from a mother's body and its life-creating work. And in contrast to Ephrem's exaltation of the Birthgiver's birthgiving in all of its messiness and pain as explored in chapter 4, here it is more than implied that the effort is not something to be celebrated but something from which to be cleansed.

History and Theology of the Postpartum Rites

Why does the rhetoric of the postpartum rites differ so markedly from that of the other sources I have examined? The answer, though perhaps impossible to know in its entirety, lies partially in the rites' history and partially in the theology surrounding them. The history of the postpartum rites is complicated, and in order to understand this history one must examine how early Christian thinkers understood the concept of impurity itself. In formulating their expectations regarding the actions of mothers after birthgiving, these thinkers relied in part on scripture, including portions of the book of Leviticus and the account in Luke's Gospel in which the Birthgiver experiences a purification rite after her birthgiving of Jesus (Luke 2:22–24). Another key to developing historical understanding of these rites lies in their textual history. Finally, and most germane, one must consider the ways in which Christian theologians have engaged childbirth and the concept of

impurity over the ages, both in canon law and in theology. I now review these aspects of history and theology in order to cultivate a fuller account of impurity and childbirth. In this review, I focus primarily on Churching, because First Day's historical and theological record is comparatively scant.

Impurity in Leviticus

Ostensibly, the postpartum rites examined here proceed from Biblical antecedents in the purification laws presented in Leviticus—in particular, Leviticus 12:1–8, which prescribes certain actions for a woman who has given birth. One point of similarity between the modern-day rite and the description given in Leviticus involves the forty-day waiting period, which in Leviticus is doubled in the case of a female child. The passage also refers to the mother as "unclean" and likens her postpartum ritual state to her ritual state while menstruating. Specifically, she is prohibited from anything holy, including the sanctuary, until she has completed the prescribed waiting period after her child's birth. The description in Leviticus differs from what is practiced today in one key aspect: Whereas Leviticus calls for the mother to bring an animal to be sacrificed as a whole burnt offering, the modern-day rite requires that she bring only herself and her child. The full passage in Leviticus reads as follows:

> Now the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, "Speak to the children of Israel, saying to them, 'If a woman conceived and bore a male child, then she shall be unclean seven days: she shall be unclean as in the days of her menstrual isolation. Then on the eighth day, the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised. She will then continue in the blood of her uncleanness thirty-three days. She is not to touch any hallowed thing, nor come into the sanctuary, until the days of her purification are fulfilled. But if she bears a female child, she will be unclean two weeks, as in her menstrual isolation, and she will continue in the blood of her uncleanness sixty-six days. When the days of her purification are fulfilled, whether for a son or daughter, she is to bring to the priest a lamb of the first year as a whole

> burnt offering, and a young pigeon or a turtledove as a sin offering, to the door of the tabernacle of testimony. Then he shall bring it before the Lord and make atonement for her who bore a male or a female. But if she is unable to afford a lamb, she may bring two turtledoves or two pigeons—one as a whole burnt offering and the other as a sin offering. So the priest shall make atonement for her; and she will be clean. (Lev. 12:1–8 SAAS)

The concept of impurity or uncleanness in Leviticus does not constitute a *sinful* state, in the sense of an intentionally committed wrongdoing, but a *ritual* state—a bodily circumstance that requires certain ritual action. As Orthodox historian Father Matthew Streett writes, "Uncleanness in the Bible is not sin, but it is a physical state from which one must recover. In other words, the state bears no tinge of guilt or culpability, even if the state is undesirable."[13] This distinction is important in the Christian context because, especially in contemporary Christian communities, concepts of "impurity" and "uncleanness" are most often understood to refer to a willfully chosen, sinful state. In light of this distinction, then, according to the Levitical text, the new mother simply needs to undergo the appropriate ritual action in order to be considered clean and pure again. The same is true for men, who can also experience forms of ritual impurity addressed in Leviticus—for example, as the result of certain types of ejaculation.[14]

The question of how to interpret Leviticus—that is, of whether or not Levitical law remains in effect for the Orthodox faithful today—is a complicated one that has been answered throughout Christian history in various ways. For instance, some Christians advocate for Christians to follow Levitical impurity law only in the case of women, whereas others reject all Levitical law as irrelevant for Christians in light of the actions and significance of Christ. In considering these stances, it is critical to note that the Levitical law referred to by these Christian interlocutors cannot be simply equated with the beliefs or practices of any particular community of Jews, either in the

[13] Matthew Streett, "What to Do With the Baby? The Historical Development of the Rite of Churching," *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 56, no. 1 (2012): 54.
[14] See Leviticus 11.

past or at present. Instead, these Christian thinkers work with Leviticus as a text and treat it with their own Christian hermeneutic.[15]

The Birthgiver's Purification

It is significant to the Christian history and theology of these rites that the Birthgiver of God herself underwent the Levitical purification after childbirth. The rite of purification after childbirth is not enshrined exclusively in the Old Testament but also makes an appearance in the Gospel of Luke. Though it is framed as a tale of her purification ("Now when the days of her purification . . ."), the text focuses more on her son and the offering presented on his behalf:

> Now when the days of her purification according to the law of Moses were completed, they brought Him to Jerusalem to present Him to the Lord (as it is written in the law of the Lord, "Every male who opens the womb shall be called holy to the LORD"), and to offer a sacrifice according to what is said in the law of the Lord, "A pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons." (Luke 2:22–24 NKJV)

Some patristic and modern thinkers propose that the Birthgiver had no need of purification because, as the Birthgiver of God, she was always able to enter the sanctuary, yet she experienced this rite nonetheless because of her son's fulfillment of Levitical law (Matt. 5:17). Others assert that she needed purification because of her typically human birth experience.[16]

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[15] For a view of Jewish purification rituals after childbirth, see Rachel Biale, *Women and Jewish Law* (New York: Schocken Books, 1984), chapter 6 and Rochelle L. Millen, *Women, Birth, and Death in Jewish Law and Practice* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2004).

[16] As a side note: although this passage from Luke begins by mentioning the Birthgiver's impurity, it then focuses on the offering made by her parents in the temple. This focus on offering can be found throughout the New Testament, and, as demonstrated in the work of Orthodox scholar Father Robert Holet, it is critical to the understanding of Christ's mission as a substitutionary offering. Robert Holet, *The First and Finest: Orthodox Stewardship as Sacred Offering* (Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse, 2013). In light of this focus, and the fact that other Orthodox rites are also very focused on offering, it is striking that the Orthodox postpartum rites are almost entirely devoid of such offertory language.

Origins of the Orthodox Postpartum Rites

Since a purification rite is mentioned very early in the development of Christianity (the Gospels were written during the first century after Christ's birth), one might expect that all Christian mothers in the early church simply did as the Birthgiver did and presented their children to the believing community after their "days of purification" were completed. In turn, it would be easy to conclude that the theme of impurity embedded in today's Churching rite results from a continuous ritual history stretching from the Birthgiver's time to the current era. And indeed, a common pastoral explanation of the impurity language (when it is explained at all) is premised on this conclusion and goes something like this: "If it was good enough for the Mother of God, it's good enough for you." Yet the historical sources, as currently understood, do not indicate a continuous history—a crucial fact in evaluating the integrity of the concepts of purification included in this rite.

In Matthew Streett's examination of the history of Churching, he states, "It is difficult to prove a direct historical link between [Levitical law and the Christian rites]."[17] Streett carefully recounts the textual history of Churching, the earliest extant copies of which date to the eighth century and contain no prayers for the mother but instead focus entirely on the child.[18] It is only later, approaching the twelfth century, that—first in peripheral variants and later in the majority of texts—the Churching rite comes to incorporate prayers for the mother, which include the putative connection between impurity and childbirth. As noted by contemporary Jesuit liturgical historian Miguel Arranz, these prayers are not found in the oldest manuscripts; therefore, they must not be of ancient origin.[19]

[17] Streett, "What to Do with the Baby?" 53.
[18] Ibid., 59.
[19] Miguel Arranz, "Les sacrements de l'ancien Euchologe constantinopolitain (1): Etude preliminaire des sources," *Orientalia Christiania Periodica* 48 (1982): 284–335.

In light of this research, it appears that the Orthodox rite of Churching was probably enacted eight centuries after the Birthgiver's purification; was at first very focused on the baby's entrance into the church as an unbaptized infant; and only later, around the eleventh or twelfth century, became concerned with the mother's purification. The First Day rite is even younger, appearing in the manuscript tradition only in the fourteenth century.[20] This lack of continuity with the early Church is significant for Orthodoxy, which strongly values historical precedent; also significant is the apparent addition of concepts of impurity relatively late in Church history. Historical fluctuation in the rite is not necessarily problematic in isolation; many Orthodox rites have morphed over time. The historical inconsistency does, however, warrant further investigation. Why would such a rite be introduced several centuries after the inception of the Church? I suggest in the following discussion that the Churching rite may have come into being as a way of acknowledging and encountering the fact that mothers were bringing unbaptized babes in arms to church. This practice would have raised concern because procedures and traditions had already been put in place for unbaptized adults but not for infants who were yet to be baptized. In turn, the language pertaining to purification of the mother may have been added later in concert with an upsurge in interest in the putative connection between lochia or menstruation and impurity.[21]

Christian Treatments of Childbirth, Menstruation, and Impurity

Patristic Thinkers

As reviewed in chapter 1, many patristic thinkers were less concerned with specifying differences between the female and male than with understanding them as equal in dignity and deification.

[20] Matthew Streett, "The Rite of the First Day," unpublished, shared by the author in 2014.
[21] Menstruation is included here because of its relationship to female fertility and because it is directly or indirectly connected to lochia in the Christian sources.

Nevertheless, they did at times turn their attention to women's bodies—especially to what came out of them: menstruation, lochia, and babies. Not surprisingly, the patristic thinkers do not speak with one voice on this topic, though they do share a family of concerns oriented around the question of how or whether Levitical law pertains to Christian life. Some of the fathers view women, the maternal body, menstruation, and motherhood as being of a piece with other aspects of human living, whereas others see these aspects as exceptional.

One recurrent concern for these thinkers is the vexing question of how to interpret the Old Testament through the lens of Christ. The question of what to do with Levitical concepts of impurity in the Christian era is not limited to women and mothers, but these topics do tend to be the locus for any discussion of menstruation and lochia. By the second century, many patristic thinkers establish a clear and purposeful distance from Levitical law. I will rely on contemporary Orthodox scholar Sister Vassa Larin's summary of patristic thinkers on this topic. She notes that some patristic thinkers "interpret Mosaic [meaning Levitical] categories of 'purity' and 'impurity' allegorically, that is to say as symbols of virtue and sin . . . [and] insist upon *baptism* and the *eucharist* as sufficient sources of 'purification' for Christians."[22] Already, then, the concept of impurity is being associated with sin and with the understanding that the sacraments are sin-cleansing. For example, third-century Saint Methodius of Olympus states that the sort of purification outlined in Leviticus is no longer necessary in the Christian context: "It is clear that he who has once been cleansed through the New Birth [baptism], can no longer be stained by that which is mentioned in the Law."[23]

Although this vein of thinking represented by Methodius addresses Levitical law more generally, others addressed the question of women and impurity more particularly. For example,

[22] Vassa Larin, "What is 'Ritual Im/purity' and Why?" *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 52, nos. 3–4 (2008): 280.
[23] Methodius of Olympus *On the Jewish Foods*, V, 3, quoted in Larin, "What is 'Ritual Im/purity' and Why?" 280.

sixth-century theologian Gregory Dialogist (Gregory the Great) writes in a letter to Archbishop Augustine of Canterbury that there is no sin in a woman coming to Church in times of menstruation—something that Levitical law prohibited (Lev. 15:19–33): "A woman should not be forbidden to go to church. After all, she suffers this involuntarily. She cannot be blamed for that superfluous matter that nature excretes. . . . She is also not to be forbidden to receive Holy Communion at this time."[24] Here, then, Gregory understands the Levitical law that prohibits a menstruating woman from going to church to be invalid in the post-Incarnation context, and his thinking can be extended to include postpartum lochial women, given the connection made in Leviticus 12.[25]

Similar but even more forceful views were expressed on purity, menstruation, and childbirth by John Chrysostom in the fourth century. He sermonized, "All things are pure. God made nothing unclean, for nothing is unclean, except in sin only. For that reaches to the soul and defiles it. Other uncleanness is human prejudice."[26] Chrysostom went so far as to say in reference to childbirth that, "those things are not polluted which arise from nature [meaning conception and childbirth] . . . but those which arise from choice [meaning the willful choice to do evil]."[27] Chrysostom refers here to other patristic thinkers (as cited in chapter 1) who contended that

[24] Gregory the Dialogist, *Patrologica Latina* 77, 1183, quoted in Larin, "What is 'Ritual Im/purity' and Why?" 287–88.
[25] Gregory also presents further nuance: If a woman, because of her understanding of the origins of sin, decides to stay home at these times, she is to be praised: "If, however, a woman does dare not to receive, for great trepidation, she should be praised. But if she does receive she should not be judged. Pious people see sin even there, where there is none. . . . So if a pious woman reflects upon these things and wishes not to approach communion, she is to be praised. But again, if she wants to live religiously and receive communion out of love, one should not stop her" (*Patrologica Latina* 77, 1183, quoted in Larin, "What is 'Ritual Im/purity' and Why?" 287–88). Gregory wants to allow room for women to conclude that, given the history of sin and its consequences, they ought to stay home at these times of their lives. As scholar Kathryn Wehr points out, "This 'yes/no' response is confusing, and menstruating women and new mothers are left to decide between not going to church (even though Gregory says they may) or risking being thought impious for attending." Kathryn Wehr, "Understanding Ritual Impurity and Sin in the Churching of Women: From Ontological to Pedagogical to Eschatological," *St Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 55, no. 1 (2011): 93.
[26] John Chrysostom, "Homily 3 on Titus," in *Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers*, First Series, vol, 13, trans. Peter Schaff, ed. by Philip Schaff. (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1889.) rev. and ed. for New Advent by Kevin Knight, 2009, http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/23083.htm.
[27] John Chrysostom, "Homily XXXIII on Hebrews," *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series*, vol. 14, trans. Frederic Gardiner, ed. Philip Schaff (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing, 1889), rev. and ed. for New Advent by Kevin Knight, 2009, http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/240233.htm.

reproductive biology resulted from the Fall and therefore was forever tainted by sin. In stark contrast, Chrysostom asserts that sin has nothing to do with biology but everything to do with one's own free will. Chrysostom clearly understands matters involving women, sexuality, and childbirth as part of what was fulfilled by the coming of Jesus Christ, meaning that they are not subject to purification requirements.

In contrast to Chrysostom, other patristic thinkers understood there to be one area of exception to the fulfillment of Levitical law by Jesus Christ: matters involving women, sexuality, and childbirth. As Larin notes, "It was characteristic of these writers to view all proscriptions of the Mosaic Law as purely symbolic except those concerning sex and sexuality. In fact, the early church writers had a tendency to view any manifestation of sexuality, including menstruation, marital relations, and childbirth as 'impure' and thus incompatible with participation in the liturgical life of the Church."[28] Larin reports that second-century scholar Origen understood menstruation as "impure" and was "the first Christian writer to accept the Old Testament concept in Lev. 12 of childbirth as something 'impure.'"[29] Larin locates the origin of this putative connection between childbirth and impurity not in some effort to create a Christian reenactment of Levitical law but in a connection coming from non-Christian, non-Jewish influences—for example, the Stoic understanding of sexual intercourse as justifiable only for procreation and the Platonic perception of unworthiness of all bodily things. Whatever the influence, the prohibition of postpartum women from the church was taken literally by Origen and others, and the same tendency to single out menstruating and postpartum women is reflected in Christian canon law.

[28] Larin, "What Is 'Ritual Im/purity' and Why?" 280.
[29] Ibid., 282. The phrase "accept the Old Testament concept" refers to accepting a Christian understanding of an Old Testament concept.

Early Canons

Canons are ecclesial laws crafted at various times and places in the Orthodox world in order to address real-life situations in the local church in that historical moment. Although canon law does take up the topics of lochia and menstruation, these topics were never addressed in the ultimate form and source for canons—the proceedings from the Church's great Ecumenical Councils. As a result, no articulation about menstruation or lochia was ever enshrined in the Orthodox Church.

In the Orthodox context, canons are understood not as civil law,[30] nor as dogma (in contrast to decrees from the Ecumenical Councils), nor even as doctrine or theology, but as ecclesial rules or law. As contemporary canon scholar Patrick Viscuso emphasizes, canons are not universal, neither in creation nor in intention; instead, they are local and circumstantial. In Viscuso's words, canon law is the "practical and daily historical description of the Church's life in any period."[31] Therefore, canons and their application are highly variable. As Kallistos Ware explains, "Canons [deal with] the earthly life of the Church, where conditions are constantly changing and individual situations are infinitely various."[32] At the same time, however, Viscuso notes that, "a canon's appearance in a collection does not [in itself] mean that it was in force."[33] In addition, though canons were most often created through a conciliar process involving a group of bishops in a particular time and place, there is no set pattern of canon creation in the Orthodox world. Nor do canons occupy a fixed position in the contemporary Orthodox world; some compendiums do exist, but they are few and far between, variably available to laypersons, held in diverse states of esteem and implementation, and often published or excerpted for polemical ends. All of this is to say that while canons are by no means irrelevant to current Church structure—and,

[30] The exception involves "nomocanons," a combination of canon and civil law present in various local contexts, including the mid-Byzantine era.
[31] Patrick Viscuso, *Orthodox Canon Law: A Casebook for Study* (Boston, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2011), 3.
[32] Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Church* (New York, NY: Penguin, 1993), 206.
[33] Viscuso, *Orthodox Canon Law*, 3.

here, they are useful to the reconstruction the history of new mothers and their engagement with Church after childbirth—they provide neither the first nor the last word on theological matters.

Several canons from early Church history mention the establishment of divisions between new mothers (and menstruating women and sometimes even midwives) and the rest of the worshippers—including such particulars as where the affected individuals might stand and when they might be able to come to church after childbirth. One early example is found in the fourth-century *Canons of Hippolytus*, likely from Egypt, which includes canons addressing various church matters, such as ordination of priests and preparation for baptism.[34] This canon provides what are essentially stage directions for the new mother when she comes to church: "The woman who has given birth stays outside the holy place forty days if the child which she has borne is male, and if it is female, eighty days. If she enters the church, she is to pray with the catechumens."[35] Although these directions include no evidence of a specific rite and no mention of impurity, the fact that new mothers were directed to stand with the catechumens, who would not have received communion, confirms that new mothers were treated as a class apart from the rest of the congregation and viewed as unfit for communion. To be clear, in a Christian context, any prescription that a new mother or a menstruating woman must stay home from church is tantamount to a prohibition from the Eucharist. In these cases, the woman in question was effectively understood to be a sort of catechumen—someone who did not fully belong, who lacked the status of a baptized Christian, and who was excommunicated in practice.[36]

In complete contrast to the *Canons of Hippolytus*, the *Didaskalia Apostolorum*, a third-century Syriac treatise that served as the foundation for subsequent compendiums of canons, advocated for

[34] Other examples include Canon 2 of Dionysius of Alexandra (third century) and Canons 6 and 7 of Timothy of Alexandra (fourth century). For a summary of canon law dictating such division, see Susan Roll, "The Churching of Women after Childbirth; An Old Rite Raising New Issues," *Questions Liturgiques* 76 (1995): 206–29.
[35] *The Canons of Hippolytus,* trans. Carol Bebawi, ed. Paul F. Bradshaw (Bramcote, England: Grove Books, 1987), Canons 18, 20.
[36] I offer more discussion of effective bans from the Eucharist for postpartum women later in this chapter.

an understanding of women's bodies that welcomed them into the church at all times. The author repeatedly assures women that they are able to take full part in the liturgical life of the church, and he offers these instructions: "For this cause therefore do you approach without restraint to those who are at rest, and hold them not unclean. In like manner also you shall not separate those (women) who are in the wonted courses [menstruating]; for she also who had the flow of blood was not chidden when she touched the skirt of our Saviour's cloak, but was even vouchsafed the forgiveness of all her sins."[37] This document of canons presents women's bodies and their blood in light of the transformation of Christ, making reference to Christ's healing of women with prolonged menstruation (Matt. 9:20–22; Mark 5:25–34; Luke 8:43–48).[38] This understanding of impurity is continued in another set of canons, the *Apostolic Constitutions* from fourth-century Syria: "For neither lawful mixture, nor child-bearing, nor the menstrual purgation, nor nocturnal pollution, can defile the nature of a man, or separate the Holy Spirit from him. Nothing but impiety and unlawful practice can do that. For the Holy Spirit always abides with those that are possessed of it, so long as they are worthy."[39]

This brief review of canons on menstruation and lochia illustrates the fact that matters of sexuality and women's bodies were given greater attention by some thinkers and in some canons.

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[37] Didascalia Apostolorum, trans. R. Hugh Connolly (Oxford, England: Clarendon Press, 1929), from Early Christian Writings, Peter Kirby, 2015, http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/didascalia.html.
In defending the understanding that Christ fulfilled this part of Levitical law, the *Didaskalia* even uses the same Gospel passage (that of the woman with the issue of blood) that the *Canons of Dionysius* uses to argue that this part of Levitical law is valid in a Christian context.

[38] Some scholars suggest that canons addressing menstruation and lochia were precipitated not by a Christian expansion of Levitical concepts but by an ineffective containment of the blood flow. Their thinking is that blood on the floor was a problem in churches, and that this practical concern stood on a par with, if not ahead of, any theological concerns. See Lawrence R. Farley, *Feminism and Tradition: Quiet Reflections on Ordination and Communion* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2012), 163; and Sergei Sveshnikov, "On 'Ritual Impurity': In Response to Sister Vassa (Larin)," *Pravmir*, July 6, 2009, http://www.pravmir.com/article_663.html. I have encountered no historical evidence to support this argument.

[39] "Apostolic Constitutions," *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 7. trans. James Donaldson, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe. (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1886) rev. and ed. for New Advent by Kevin Knight, 2009, http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/07156.htm. Other canons, such as the ones produced at the Council of Gangra, affirm a view of marital sexuality that also work against a connection between impurity and menstruation or lochia. See Larin, "What Is 'Ritual Im/purity' and Why?" 283–84.

In some instances, canons held that baptized women ought to be welcome at the chalice, regardless of their menstrual or lochial status; in others, they were denied the chalice based on their menstrual or lochial status. Additionally, other dictates from Levitical law (regarding, for example, sacrifice and contact with lepers) were considered obsolete. This illustrates the variance within canon law on these matters of women and menstruation and lochia.

Late Byzantine Treatments

It was not until the twelfth century that references to the mother's purification were added to the Churching rite. Clearly, women had been bringing their infants to church from the earliest days of Christianity, and, at least in some times and places, engaging in some postpartum church-attending abstinence, perhaps in accordance with local customs. Yet it appears that no rite had been established to define an end to the postpartum period. Thus, even if women followed the practice of staying home from church at certain times, they did not require a priest's public permission to return to the Eucharist. This state of affairs apparently changed in the twelfth century, when the rite that had first been used to welcome the baby to church was expanded to include references to the mother's impurity.

The preceding notes about the patristic thinkers and canon law illustrate that negative perceptions of sexuality and childbirth found their way into Christian thinking from its earliest days.[40] As I now detail, these perceptions intensified in the twelfth century. This intensification of interest in childbirth and impurity likely precipitated the addition of purification language to the Churching rite, as well as the crafting of First Day. In this period, as argued by contemporary Orthodox scholar Kyriaki FitzGerald, a new level of attention was focused on the place of Levitical

[40] The ebb and flow of such perceptions in Christianity is described by twentieth-century Orthodox theologian Paul Evdokimov in his introduction to *The Sacrament of Love* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985), 15–48.

law in Christianity and its connection with ordination: "In the two centuries prior to the end of the Byzantine Empire in 1453, the Old Testament views regarding the 'uncleanness' of women (perhaps more than the inferiority of women) again gained a certain prominence. According to Byzantine canonists, it was a woman's menstruation which prevented her from being ordained and exercising any form of liturgical ministry."[41]

Thus the association of sin with sexuality and childbirth had consequences outside the sphere of childbearing. It also brought changes to women's roles in the Orthodox Church, such as the ostensible end of the female diaconate. For example, one fourteenth-century canonist's thoughts on this topic are summarized as follows by Viscuso: "[He] also states that the 'involuntary monthly flow' motivated the Fathers to abolish the ordination of deaconesses. The theological foundation of this prohibition is based on the impure state of women experiencing a period, which makes them unfit to receive the Eucharist, enter a church, and hence participate in a ritual of ordination. However, the canonist assumes that even though women may participate in Holy Communion and public worship after their natural purification, the fact that such menstruation has taken place permanently bars them from ordination at any time."[42]

Yet the negative perceptions of sexuality and childbirth that infiltrated the postpartum rites were not a direct reflection of the wording or concepts indigenous to Levitical law. As Behr-Sigel notes, the impurity aspects of both Churching and menstrual regulations "don't even have the excuse of being faithful to the literal text of the Scriptures. Under certain conditions, these prohibitions applied to men as well as to women in the Old Testament, but in our times, only those

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[41] Kyriaki FitzGerald, *Women Deacons in the Orthodox Church* (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1999), 143.
[42] Patrick Viscuso, *Sexuality, Marriage, and Celibacy in Byzantine Law* (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2008) 22–23, footnote 79. Even today, this association of fertility bleeding with impurity is used as one justification for an all-male priesthood in the Orthodox context. For example, as theologian Lawrence Farley reports, "one teacher at an Orthodox school in North America advanced the monthly uncleanness of women as the main reason they could not be ordained to the priesthood, since, he said, they could not enter the altar while they were menstruating" (*Feminism and Tradition*, 162).

aspects that apply to women have been retained, as though there was an intention of deeply ingraining a feeling of impurity solely based on womanhood."[43]

In addition to this focus on matters involving women, there was also a movement, in the Christian context, from a ritual understanding of impurity relating to childbirth to a ritual understanding that included sin and shame. As contemporary Church historian Susan Roll observes, "One can see the crossover taking place from the Hebraic notion of cultic [ritual] purity, in which the new mother's isolation from the community was temporary while sexual intercourse as such remained a holy act, with the presuppositions concerning the fundamental baseness and defilement of human generation in birth and flesh characteristic of Greek philosophical dualism and Christian ascetic tendencies."[44] This is the atmosphere in which—and the reasoning with which—the supposed connection between childbirth and impurity was added to Churching. It was not just a revival of Levitical concepts in a Christian context; instead, a new link was made between women and sin. Therefore, it appears that contemporary Orthodox scholar Cheryl Kristolaitis is correct in arguing that the "original sense of ritual impurity because of blood-flow had been lost and only the notion of a sinful state was left."[45]

In addition to this growing association between sin and women's bodies, the putative connection between impurity and childbirth in the twelfth century may have been strengthened by other sources of possible influence. For example, the earliest Churching rites from the Christian

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[43] Elisabeth Behr-Sigel, *The Ministry of Women in the Church*, trans. Stephen Bigham (Redondo Beach, Oakwood Publications, 1991), 223. Canons exist regarding "nocturnal emissions" by men and a subsequent need for purification, and one rite included in the same volume of *The Book of Needs* as the Churching rite is called The Office for Priests Who Have Been Tempted in Sleep. See *The Great Book of Needs*, vol. 1 (South Canaan, PA: St. Tikhon's Seminary Press, 2000), 139–48). There is little evidence, however, that these canons are adhered to today or that the rite is performed. Even if it is performed, the contrast remains vast because the priest would undergo these prayers in private, whereas a woman's putative uncleanness is mentioned and purified publically.

[44] Susan Roll, "The Churching of Women after Childbirth; An Old Rite Raising New Issues," *Questions liturgiques* 76 (1995): 210.

[45] Cheryl Kristolaitis, "From Purification to Celebration: The History of the Service for Women after Childbirth," *Journal of the Canadian Church Historical Society* 28, no. 2 (1986): 57.

West focused not on the infant, as in the East, but almost entirely on the mother and her purification.[46] The earliest extant Western purity rite comes from the eleventh century, thus postdating the Eastern Churching rite for the baby alone, but predating the inclusion of the concept of impurity in the East. The Western rites contain various readings from the Psalms and call for the priest to lead the woman into church by the hand while reciting a prayer that "asks for purification from sin so that the woman may be worthy to enter."[47] He later sprinkles her with holy water and censes her. Though as yet a textual connection has not been established, it is possible that texts or practices from the West spread eastward at this time, thus prompting the addition of impurity to the Churching rite in the East.[48]

Other scholars suggest that Church ritual in this time period was influenced by dualistic, pagan concepts of impurity; the term *pagan* is used by these scholars to refer to polytheistic religions existing in both Western and Eastern Europe before the advent of Christianity.[49] Byzantine culture at this time included various superstitions surrounding childbirth, which are described as follows by contemporary scholar of Byzantine history Vassiliki Foskolou: "A whole series of apotropaic practices related to babies and children indicated how widespread this belief was: red ribbons, for example, were tied to babies' arms as amulets to provide protection against diseases and the evil eye. . . . Although the church officially condemned such unorthodox religious practices, it offered prayers for the protection of mothers in labour and new-born children which—

[46] Streett, "What to Do with the Baby?" 66.
[47] Ibid., 67.
[48] Another possible textual connection, as yet unexplored, involves the development of Churching rites in the Oriental Orthodox Churches. The Armenian rite, as recorded in prayer books available today, focuses less on the mother's impurity—even though it is specifically mentioned in one prayer—and more on the renewal of life and scriptural and hymnic references to the Lord's Presentation. See "Armenian Canon for the Fortieth Day," in *Maštoc' Ritual Book*, 6th ed., trans. Michael Daniel Findikyan (Jerusalem, Israel: Saints James Press, 1961) 72–81.
[49] Here I am noting the possible influx of so-called pagan ideas and practices into Christianity in a way that is incompatible with Christianity. In contrast, I have written elsewhere about the fact that many pagan ideas and practices *were* compatible with Christianity and were thus "baptized" into Christian use. See "Easter in Technicolor: The Ukrainian Craft of Pysanky," *Commonweal* 134, no. 7 (April 2, 2007): 7.

it is no coincidence—contained reference to the evil eye."[50] Indeed, witness the following line from First Day: "Preserve her from every approach of invisible spirits; yea, O Lord, from sickness and infirmity, from jealousy and envy, and from the evil eye."[51] Moreover, as Larin writes, "pagan Slavs, like ancient pagans in general, held that any manifestation of sexuality was ritually defiling."[52] It is possible that, in a similar fashion, external influence from such sources contributed to the addition of the concept of impurity to the Orthodox Churching rite.

Whatever the influence—Western Christianity, other religions, Stoic philosophy, Christian construals of Leviticus, or something yet unnamed—the introduction of impurity into the Orthodox Churching rite constituted an innovation. In other words, rather than a rite with a history stretching back to the time of the writing of Leviticus and a continual existence from then until now, the rite as it is now known was formed in the early second millennium under the influence of various understandings of female impurity and a negative understanding of childbirth—and all this despite the quite different vein of thought in earlier Christian circles that overtly rejected impurity concepts relating to women and mandated a new, transfigured understanding of menstruation and childbirth that included neither sin nor ritual impurity. Once it was established, however, this innovation spread forcefully because of the historical moment in which it occurred. Notably, the twelfth-century addition of the concept of impurity to the Churching rite—and the fourteenth-century inauguration of the First Day rite—occurred not long before the advent of the printing press. Indeed, widespread use of the press came relatively quickly on the heels of these liturgical innovations, and it brought drastic, transformative uniformity to the Orthodox rites. As twentieth-century Church historian Thomas Pott notes, "The invention of the printing press was a

[50] Vassiliki Foskolou, "The Virgin, the Christ-Child and the Evil Eye," in *Images of the Mother of God: Perceptions of the Theotokos in Byzantium*, ed. Maria Vassilaki (Farnham, Great Britain: Ashgate, 2005), 255.
[51] "Prayers on the First Day after a Woman Has Given Birth to a Child," *The Great Book of Needs*, 4.
[52] Larin, "What Is 'Ritual Im/purity' and Why?" 288.

critical event for the history of the liturgy, making it possible to reproduce large numbers of texts, all absolutely identical."[53] Therefore, with the printing press came codification of rites across geography and time as never before, and local variations and organic evolutions of rites were no more. As a result, references to impurity were frozen in the rites, and there they remain.

Contemporary Treatments

The preceding historical review of both the concepts of impurity and the postpartum rites enables an informed discussion of the rites' contemporary status. As noted, the equation of childbirth with impurity remains very much a part of these rites. Yet suggestions of the mother's defilement, uncleanness, and unworthiness go against the contemporary understanding of childbirth as a healthy and natural biological process having nothing to do with impurity—especially since the concepts of impurity and uncleanness unexplained in the rites themselves, and often also in the pastoral setting more generally. Even so, in an Orthodox setting, rites are expected to make demands upon their faithful. Liturgy's purpose is not to mollify, or even reassure, but to draw humans closer to God and draw God closer to them. Thus an initial reaction of offense or confusion requires further examination and does not alone constitute grounds for dismissal of the impurity language in these rites. However, it is not just the sensibilities of many modern women and men that suggest a serious problem here; rather, the widespread aversion to performing the rites as they are written indicates a true liturgical crisis.

My knowledge of the current practice of these rites indicates that their use in the United States and Europe varies by parish and jurisdiction; they are often celebrated but also often cause

[53] Thomas Pott, *Byzantine Liturgical Reform: A Study of Liturgical Change in the Byzantine Tradition* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2010), 230.

discomfort on the part of the priest and the mother.[54] The rites are occasionally explained, but in wildly inconsistent ways, which indicates both the need for alteration and the need for better pastoral education for priests about these rites and about motherhood. In some cases, First Day and Churching are celebrated in the tongue of the old country, so that an exclusively English-speaking mother simply does not have to hear them. In fact, this was the priest's suggestion upon the birth of my second child: "I cannot explain it. I don't like it. But we have to do it. But we could do it in Church Slavonic, if you would like."

In many other cases today, priests change the rites on the fly or pencil changes into their copy of *The Great Book of Needs*, either simply omitting the references to impurity or replacing them with more theologically valid language. That is, many Orthodox clergymen have reservations so grave about the impurity language that they are willing to alter the rites, often without an explicit blessing from their bishop. This action is very unusual in the traditional and hierarchy-oriented Orthodox context, and I know of no other rite that prompts the same response among clergy. There are even cases of translators intentionally altering the language of the rites, presumably without any official blessing.[55]

The pastoral concerns about these rites—both from priests and from others—are prompting examination by theologians and historians, whose responses tend to fall into three basic sets: one (the minority), a full defense of the impurity language; two, a qualified defense that relies heavily on a generous interpretation of the concept of impurity; and three, an insistence on the lack of a sound theological basis for associating impurity with menstruation and childbirth, coupled with

[54] My observations, though not quantified, come from hundreds of conversations with Orthodox women and Orthodox clergy from across the United States and Europe over the course of the last decade. The current uses of these rites would make for a wonderful anthropology project.

[55] Alkiviadis Calivas, *Aspects of Orthodox Worship: Essays in Theology and Liturgy* (Boston, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2003), 154.

a push to explain and change the rites. I now turn to each of these positions, acknowledging that I hold the third.

Among the most ardent contemporary defenders of the concept of impurity in the postpartum rites is Metropolitan Hierotheos Vlachos, a current bishop and theologian from Greece, whose understanding of these rites meshes well with those, described earlier, held by Origen.[56] Vlachos' defense is premised, in one part, on his allegiance to the text of Leviticus and his insistence that the clean-unclean dichotomies remain in place in Orthodox Christianity and, in another part, on a connection—not found in Leviticus—between childbirth or procreation and the Fall. In treating this topic, Vlachos depends heavily on the account of the Fall provided in Genesis and scarcely refers to the New Testament or to Christ. He writes, "Certainly the birth of children is a blessing of God**,** but it must be realized that the manner in which man [sic] gives birth is a fruit and result of the fall; it is the so-called coats of skin, which Adam wore after the fall, and the loss of God's grace."[57] With "coats of skin," Vlachos invokes the strand of thought mentioned in previous chapters that understands the Fall as enacting a change in the physical state of humans, giving them, among other attributes, the reproductive organs and means that they now have.[58]

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[56] Vlachos is joined by others who defend a connection between impurity and churching. One is Orthodox priest and theologian Father Michael Pomazansky, who views the impurity prayers as focused on the accumulation of sin between the mother's last reception of communion and her Churching (which, he says, she should accept "as a period of penance similar to those imposed at Confession"). Pomazansky brooks no talk of alteration: "There are no grounds for personal distress. Whoever might harbor such a feeling of discontent should realize that it is only an indication of self-importance, of too great a confidence in oneself, of the languishing in the soul of pride which is the root of our moral discontent." See Michael Pomazansky, "On the Rite of Churching an Infant and the Prayer for a Woman Who Has Given Birth," *Inok 30, no. 193 (February, 2005),* http://www.russian-inok.org/page.php/page.php?page=english2&dir=english&month=0205. Similarly, the late Father Seraphim Rose, a twentieth-century monastic theologian, asserts that the views of those who advocate any alteration of Churching "reflect the majority of pampered, self-centered, frivolous young people of today who, when they come to religion, expect to find 'spirituality with comfort,' something which is instantly reasonable to their immature minds which have been stupefied by their 'modern education.'" See Seraphim Rose, *The Orthodox Word*, vol. 11, no. 6 (Nov.–Dec., 1975), 230. Alice Linsley, a contemporary anthropologist, is concerned that alteration of the rites would diminish appreciation of ontological difference between male and female, which she understands to be present in all religious traditions. See Alice Linsley, "Stepping into the Stream," *Road to Emmaus, v*ol. 11, no. 1, 3–37.

[57] Hierotheos Vlachos of Nafpaktos, *The Feasts of the Lord*, trans. Esther Williams (Levadia-Hellas, Greece: Birth of the Theotokos Monastery, 2000), 77.

[58] See Valerie Karras, "Patristic Views on the Ontology of Gender," in *Personhood: Orthodox Christianity and the Connection*

Vlachos also connects the putative impurity of childbirth directly to that of conception: "The woman is unclean who is to give birth when she has been fertilized by a man."[59] Vlachos goes on: "Eventually by dispensation God blessed this way in which man is born, but nevertheless it is a fruit of the fall. Parents as well as children should bear this in mind. The ceremony of purification should be interpreted in this theological framework."[60] Thus Vlachos sees a connection between impurity and childbirth as an inevitable consequence of the Fall, and, in his view, the mother is released from this consequential impurity through the purification ritual of Churching.

As discussed earlier, this line of thinking is precisely what John Chrysostom and others rejected. Indeed, Chrysostom made a clear distinction between natural bodily experiences, such as childbirth, and willfully chosen sin. Vlachos, however, perceives no such distinction in the case of sexuality and childbearing. His understanding is filtered only through the Fall; he does not take into account the Church's understanding of Anna's conception of the Birthgiver, or the *Ustyug* icon, or the Birthgiver's childbirth experience. Nor does he make allowance for the influence of Jesus Christ on the Church's understanding of the female body.

More popular than this sort of outright defense is a qualified defense, or generous interpretation, of the supposed association between impurity and childbirth. This view is best represented by Alexander Schmemann**,** whose understanding of these rites, in contrast to Vlachos' view, involves a change in the understanding of childbirth that was brought about by the coming of Christ. For Schmemann, these rites as they existed prior to Jesus Christ (as practiced by anyone predating the Incarnation) were ontological—that is, they reflected innate, ontological qualities of

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Between Body, Mind and Soul (Westport, CT: Bergin and Garvey, 1996), 113–19; and Verna E. F. Harrison, "Male and Female in Cappadocian Theology," in *The Journal of Theological Studies* 41, no. 2 (January 1, 1990): 441–71.

[59] Vlachos, *The Feasts of the Lord*, 78.

[60] Ibid., 77.

the reality of women.[61] By his understanding, the advent and work of Christ makes all things new, including the rites' meaning, which is transformed from an ontological to a pedagogical significance in the sense that they are "leading man into the mystery of redemption."[62] In Schmemann's view, then, the rites do not bring about an ontological shift in a particular woman but rather bear witness to the ontological shift that has already taken place on behalf of all women and men who confess Jesus as Lord.

Within this framework, Schmemann explains the inclusion of impurity in the rites as the logical extension of the complexity of welcoming a child into an imperfect world. He feels that a new mother inevitably reckons with the coupling of her joy at the birth of her child with her awareness of the inevitability of his or her future suffering. This contradiction, according to Schmemann, leads to prayers for forgiveness and purification of all parties present: "And if these prayers are, first of all, a cry for forgiveness, it is because only divine forgiveness—given and fulfilled in Christ and His Coming—can purify that joy, restore it to its fullness, make this beginning of life the beginning also of salvation and redemption."[63]

Schmemann interprets this request for forgiveness—and here he employs a very generous hermeneutic—not as relating directly to the act of childbirth but as constituting a general request: "Indeed it is not for some particular sin, for some particular 'impurity,' that the Church asks forgiveness, but for sins 'voluntary and involuntary,' i.e., for sin as the very reality of 'this world,' for impurity and pollution permeating the whole of it."[64] He asserts that childbirth itself is not impure, or at least not any more impure than anything else in the world, but also that the fallenness of our world brings impurity to any circumstance, and that this impurity is particularly evoked

[61] As noted elsewhere regarding other Christian interlocutors, Schmemann's understanding of impurity is through a Christian lens; there is no interest in authentic anthropological understanding of Jewish practice or meaning as relates to impurity.
[62] Schmemann, *Of Water and the Spirit* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1974), 133.
[63] Ibid., 137.
[64] Ibid., 137.

when contrasted with a new and pristine human being. In this way, he understands the treatment of impurity in the rites to be restorative—a reflection of Christ's work in restoring his Church to purity—in a general sense, but not connected to the act of childbirth per se.

For many, Schmemann's view is an easier pill to swallow than Vlachos' because at least it takes Jesus Christ into account. Even so, it is flawed. At the same time that Schmemann insists on this need for cleansing as a general one, he also distinguishes sexuality in much the same way that some patristic thinkers did. He insists that everything is fallen—there are no exceptions—but, in his view, some things, including sex, are "extra fallen" and therefore have a special status: "Because sex is the focus, the very expression of that 'lust of the flesh, lust of the eyes, and pride of life' which shapes and determines the life of 'this world,' sex is *under law and not under grace*."[65] In Schmemann's understanding, then, it makes sense for the postpartum rites to simultaneously rejoice in the new baby and mourn the corruption of the world. Schmemann concludes that the Church asks, "How can she *help* the mother whose fate in 'this world' is to experience child-bearing precisely as 'weakness and infirmity,' as enslavement to fallen nature, if not by asking for forgiveness, the only true *healing*, the only true return to the *wholeness* broken by sin?"[66]

There is a point here. Orthodox services unrelated to childbirth are sprinkled with requests for purity and forgiveness. In fact, most Orthodox services begin with a prayer to the Holy Spirit: "O Heavenly King, the Comforter, the Spirit of Truth, Who are in all places and fill all things, Treasurer of blessings and giver of life, come and dwell within us and cleanse us of every blemish [alternately, "impurity"] and save our souls, O Blessed One." Similar requests for purity are common in Orthodox prayers; indeed, seeking release from the impurity and pollution of this world is very much a part of Orthodox prayer, both in public and in private.

[65] Ibid., 135.
[66] Ibid., 137.

Yet the mentions of purity and impurity in the Churching rite differ entirely from the language of these prayers. For one thing, the postpartum rites are concerned with the process of childbirth and the blood that follows—not with the "impurity" that that is accumulated through our choice of vice over virtue (and the choices of those around us), which is how the impurity references in daily Orthodox prayer life are taught and received. In addition, the postpartum rites focus on "bodily impurity," which the Churching prayers posit as potentially contagious. This understanding of things differs greatly from that of the notion of willfully chosen sin. The texts of the postpartum rites simply do not present a more general understanding of the need for cleansing or forgiveness, nor do the typical penitential prayers (e.g., the Holy Spirit prayer) refer to infectious bodily impurity. Thus Schmemann interprets these rites in a manner that, though relatively generous, bears no relation to their face value; for that reason, his interpretation requires hermeneutical gymnastics that obscure both the reality of the impurity language in these rites and the Church's true understanding of impurity. As a result, as much as Schmemann insists upon embracing the revelation of Christ and moving away from a dualistic understanding of this world, he is not able to do so when it comes to sexuality and childbirth and the notion of impurity in the rites.

A note about Schmemann: I quote him in this chapter both in support of my examination of liturgy and in opposition to this specific expression of Orthodox liturgy, the postpartum rites. I also return to his views, on the connection between the new mother and the Birthgiver, at the end of this chapter. This mixed approach to Schmemann is awkward but necessary. He was not unsympathetic to alterations of Orthodox rites, but he was closed to the idea of altering the postpartum rites. Perhaps if he were alive today and had the opportunity to see the recent historical and theological studies of these rites, as well as the ways in which the rites are frequently altered—

information that was not available in his time—he would, in his own liturgical-theology fashion, think differently, though of course this cannot be known with certainty.

A Case for Altering the Postpartum Rites

In my presentation of the history of the putative connection between impurity and childbirth, I included a range of views regarding this concept's theological validity. This section of the chapter expounds my own views on the subject with the support of other scholars and theological initiatives, then offers thoughts about the surmountable obstacles to alteration, as well as suggestions for the manner in which the rites might be altered.

Theologically Unsound

The theology of Jesus Christ and the Apostle Paul is authoritative: The Levitical proscriptions regarding impurity are no longer in effect because of the revelation of Christ and the act of baptism, and this dispensation extends to menstruation, lochia, and childbirth. Christ recast concepts of purity from the body into the sphere of the conscience, and baptism cleanses, bringing a new and "pure" person into Christ. Clearly, then, a new mother is not returned to her pre-baptismal state by giving birth. She is not temporarily suspended from her illumination (her post-baptismal state), and to even suggest it undermines the very potency of the sacrament of baptism. This proper understanding of women's blood and bodies was, as I have shown, present throughout the history of the Church, though at times aberrant conceptions occluded truly Christian thoughts and practices. For whatever reasons, the putative connection of impurity with childbirth—which is clearly incongruent with the Orthodox Christian understanding of the effects of Jesus Christ's advent, death, and Resurrection—was introduced into the Churching prayers around the twelfth to

fourteenth centuries, and, largely because of the printing press and an accompanying reluctance to alter liturgical rites, there they remain. As Vassa Larin sums it up:

> A close look at the origins and character of the concept of "ritual im/purity" reveals a rather disconcerting, fundamentally non-Christian phenomenon in the guise of Orthodox piety. Regardless of whether the concept entered the church practice under direct Judaic and/or pagan influences, it finds no justification in Christian anthropology and soteriology. Orthodox Christians, male and female, have been cleansed in the waters of baptism, buried and resurrected with Christ, who became our flesh and our humanity, trampled death by death, and liberated us from its fear. Yet we have retained a practice that reflects pagan and Old-Testament fears of the material world. This is why a belief in "ritual im/purity" is not primarily a social issue, nor is it primarily about the depreciation of women. It is rather about the depreciation of the incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ and its salvific consequences."[67]

This issue of impurity is indeed related to the Incarnation of Jesus Christ and its consequences, which is why the problem has received attention in recent years. Within the past decade, several scholars have written on the topic of purity and women and have advocated for change in the Church's rites and practices, including, in addition to Larin herself, Matthew Streett, Kathryn Wehr, and contemporary historian of liturgy Father Alkiviadis Calivas.[68] Calivas writes, "There are people today—clergy, theologians, and laypeople—who feel that the received texts express concepts that are ambiguous and, some would even say, offensive to the modern worshiper and most especially to women. We are bound, therefore, to examine the appropriateness of the prayers in these rites."[69] Calivas himself was so convinced of the clear need to change these rites

[67] Larin, "What is 'Ritual Im/purity' and Why?" 292.
[68] See Streett, "What to Do with the Baby?" 51–71. For theology, see Larin, "What Is 'Ritual Im/purity' and Why?" 275–92; and Kathryn Wehr, "Understanding Ritual Purity and Sin in the Churching of Women," 85–105.
[69] Calivas, *Aspects of Orthodox Worship*, 139. Here Calivas makes a different case for altering the rites than I have made: that they are offensive to the modern ear. I agree that they are offensive and that this is grounds for alarm, yet I have also presented here many other grounds for their alteration. I would hesitate to advocate that anything be up for review based only on its offensiveness, because, as Saint Paul reminds us, the cross itself was an offensive scandal (1 Cor. 1:23).

that he used them as a test case for change in his book about Orthodox worship.[70] The scholars who have made the case for changing these rites are not limited to North America. For example, scholar Father Konstantinos Papayiannis has written several books on this topic and made concrete proposals for changing these rites in Greece.[71]

Calls to alter these rites have also come from other quarters, such as theological conferences composed primarily of Orthodox women. A statement drafted and signed by the participants of the Agapia Conference on Women in the Orthodox Church of 1979 asks, "Rather than coming from the Gospel, do these usages not have their roots in ancient beliefs, taboos, and fears about women? Are they not legalistic or magic conceptions, beliefs, taboos, and fears about things 'pure' and 'impure'? Did not Christ in his earthly life always stand against such things?"[72] And here is a statement produced at a 1997 conference, titled "Discerning the 'Sign of the Times': Women in the Life of the Orthodox Church" and held in Istanbul, which included mostly female delegates from North America, the Middle East, Asia, Africa, and Australia: "We ask for a reevaluation of certain liturgical customs, for example, the presentation of infants and the 40 day rule for childbirth, the prayer for miscarriages, abortions and the post-partum mothers, and expectations pertaining to the reception of communion."[73] These groups of Orthodox women have made their views on these rites known in the statements from these two conferences.

In addition to the theological and historical reasons I have discussed for altering these rites, there is also a social and pastoral reason. It is known that an unsettling percentage of women experience some sort of sexual abuse in their lifetime, whether at the hands of a family member, an acquaintance, an authority figure (either in or outside of the church), a partner, or a complete

[70] Ibid., 138–161.
[71] These texts have not been published in English translation. See a reference to them in Calivas, *Aspects of Orthodox Worship*, 153.
[72] Quoted in Behr-Sigel, *The Ministry of Women in the Church*, 222.
[73] Conference statement from "Discerning the 'Sign of the Times': Women in the Life of the Orthodox Church," 1996, Syria, quoted in FitzGerald, *Women Deacons in the Orthodox Church*, appendix E, 220.

stranger. It is also known that many of these women experience this trauma as a feeling of shame or impurity in their bodies and in their minds. Yet the Church's ability to help women heal from the very real wounds of perceived impurity after sexual abuse is compromised by the connection posited between the experience of childbirth and impurity in the context of Orthodox rites. To put it more pointedly, women who have experienced this trauma are further damaged by the putative association made between childbirth and impurity in these rites. These women need true healing, true purification from their trauma, which the Orthodox Church can help provide only when it embraces its own teachings about the female body, including the maternal body. This is just one example of many cases in which misdirected teaching about sexuality and the body can not only mislead the faithful in one sphere but also prevent the extension of care in another.

In the words of Calivas, "To avoid the pitfalls of liturgical formalism and the dangers of misguided piety, liturgy must pulsate with life, be relevant to the lives of people, and responsive to their deepest needs and aspirations. In other words, we are obliged to probe the tradition to see how convincingly it speaks to the hearts and minds of the people today."[74] Now that a growing group of historians, theologians, laity, and clergy have embraced the need to make the postpartum rites "pulsate with life, be relevant to the lives of people, and responsive to their deepest needs and aspirations"—and be theologically sound—the question is *how* to go about altering First Day and Churching.

Obstacles to, and Mechanisms for, Change

As might be expected, a number of obstacles stand in the way of efforts to alter these rites; in particular, three mind-sets in the Orthodox world today are not amenable to alterations in

[74] Calivas, *Aspects of Orthodox Worship*, 138.

liturgical rites, and the Church's ecclesial structure also poses challenges. I now review these obstacles and then delineate a possible process for change.

First, Orthodox deeply love tradition and tend to view historical precedent as a decisive factor in any argument. This love of tradition preserves the seventeen-hundred year old Divine Liturgy of the church, it makes relevant the words of the fourth-century desert monastics to today's laity, it means that the faithful today chant the same processional hymn as they did in the sixth century as they carry the shroud around the church on Holy Friday. Orthodox, however, sometimes pervert this love of continuity and tradition into blind traditionalism, which chains them to legalistic proceduralism: adherence to tradition for the sake of tradition rather than for the sake of truth. This group might be persuaded by the relatively late introduction of the putative connection between childbirth and impurity into these rites.

Second, as Orthodox love tradition, so also they love the work of the patristic thinkers. Because of this appreciation, the work of these thinkers is very much alive in the church today well beyond the bounds of scholarship or clerical training; it is not uncommon to see copy of, say, Basil's *On the Human Condition* tucked into a layperson's bag at church coffee hour. Yet there are some who take this veneration for the patristic thinkers too far, who might be considered patristic fundamentalists—that is, who understand the truth to have been completely set in bedrock by the last Ecumenical Council. This group ought to be influenced both by the lack of patristic doctrine on the subject and the strong patristic support for understanding Levitical law as being fulfilled in Jesus Christ—and therefore not presently placing a requirement upon Christians in terms of their ritual behavior, including that which involves postpartum rituals.

The third mind-set is well represented by Alexander Schmemann's interpretation of these rites. This view holds that the rites are about an occasion to seek general forgiveness for all the sin in the world, at the expense of acknowledging that these rites, by their own words, are not about a

general sense of forgiveness, but are instead focused on the postpartum woman's uncleanness and concomitant need for purity. As indicated earlier, however, this interpretation is unsupported by anything in the rite or the rite's history; therefore, it constitutes an example of a tendency in Orthodoxy to gloss over prickly theological issues, sometimes going to great lengths to do so, in order to offer a favorable—perhaps more theologically palatable—interpretation. The cost of this maneuver lies in the fact that it takes the place of owning up to mistakes of the past and making an effort to correct them. This group might see that Schmemann's interpretations of the rites have little to do with the language or concepts included in the rites per se. They also might be able to appreciate what is at stake: Orthodox mothers' perceptions of themselves and of their church, as well as the Church's public theology of motherhood.

Another, more tangible obstacle lies in the avenues for liturgical change within the ecclesial structure of Orthodox Christianity. One the one hand, the absence of a sole central authority—a head Bishop, for example, or a ruling body that issues decrees for all of the Orthodox world to follow—means that various parts of the Orthodox Church hold authority to alter liturgy as the Spirit moves them (and as I have demonstrated, this happens even on the parish level). On the other hand, the lack of centralized authority means that bishops who might be inclined to initiate change may feel wary of the attention they could attract from other bishops, from their patriarchs, and from their faithful, therefore making them think twice even if they support change to these rites. More particularly, the ecclesial structure in the United States poses an obstacle to changing the rites in this country. The Orthodox migration to the United States has seen multiple nationalities establish their own parishes connected to their respective mother countries. As a result, there is no single, united "American Orthodox" church; instead, there is a tangle of Orthodoxy in the United States. This makes the avenue for cross-jurisdictional change challenging.

Yet even in the face of these obstacles, those who wish to see these rites altered know that, as Pott wrote, "True reform of the Church is rooted in the Church, which uses the methods of the Church, and which remains inextricably linked to the Church."[75] Indeed, the Church already has a fresh—and related—example of liturgical alteration on the order of the changes desired in the postpartum rites; liturgical reform of the miscarriage rite is under way in the jurisdiction of the Orthodox Church in America. The miscarriage rite contains the same putative connection between impurity and childbirth and—perhaps even worse—places the blame for a miscarriage, of any type, on the shoulders of the mother.[76] This liturgical reform effort originated with one laywoman, Dennise Kraus, who was motivated to provide new and theologically sound resources for mothers and families grieving the death of a miscarried or stillborn child. She contacted her New Jersey bishop, Michael Dahulich of the Orthodox Church in America, and together they altered the miscarriage rite found in *The Great Book of Needs* and composed a few other rites, including a funeral for a miscarried infant. Bishop Michael then blessed the fruits of their labor, and he and Kraus distributed copies in his diocese. These new rites were then blessed by the Orthodox Church in America's Synod of Bishops.[77]

The postpartum rites are being addressed by a differently configured group, of which I am a founding member, with the hope for similar acceptance and alteration. We are an interjurisdictional group of Orthodox Christian lay theologians and historians who have come together to reconsider the First Day and Churching rites. Our group includes members affiliated with the Antiochian Orthodox Church, the Greek Orthodox Church of America, the Orthodox Church in America, and the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the United States of America. We

[75] Pott, *Byzantine Liturgical Reform*, 35.
[76] "Prayer for a Woman When She Has Miscarried/Aborted an Infant," in *The Great Book of Needs*, vol. 1 (South Canaan, PA: St. Tikhon's Seminary Press, 2000), 16–18.
[77] "Holy Synod of Bishops Concludes Fall Session," Orthodox Church in America, October, 18, 2013, http://oca.org/news/headline-news/holy-synod-of-bishops-concludes-fall-session1.

work under a motto gleaned from Pott's remark that "reform does not mean to invent something new, *ex nihilo*, but to make even clearer the truths and values that exist already."[78] We are in regular contact with multiple bishops from different Orthodox jurisdictions, most of whom are supportive of our project. Our goals are to educate the laity and the clergy about the history and theology of these rites; to continue to consider the rites' history, theology, and translations; to offer prayers for the laity having to do with conception, pregnancy, childbirth, and parenthood; and, ultimately, to alter First Day and Churching, with an eye toward removing the theologically unsound language of impurity while preserving these prayers' deep relational aspect (on which I elaborate in a moment). We hope ultimately that these alterations will be blessed and distributed by our bishops in the United States and that they will find their way to other parts of the world.

As Calivas notes, "Every local Church—diocese or archdiocese—is obliged to regulate and guard the liturgy, but it is also equally obliged to continuously evaluate its effectiveness and to develop its shape and expression to meet the needs and demands of the times without betraying the essential traditions and faith of the Church."[79] As even Schmemann—who resisted the notion of altering these postpartum rites—said, "The Church has adopted new orders of services for their beneficial effect upon the people, and has replaced these by others when she saw that they were not altogether helpful or necessary."[80] It is my great hope and prayer that the bishops of the Church will embrace their responsibility to "meet the needs and demands of the times" in a theologically sound manner, will acknowledge that these rites are being altered in many ways on the fly, and will bless proposed alterations to the postpartum rites.

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[78] Pott, *Byzantine Liturgical Reform,* p. 10.

[79] Calivas, *Aspects of Orthodox Worship*, 155.

[80] Alexander Schmemann, *Liturgy and Tradition: Theological Reflections of Alexander Schmemann* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1990), 21. Schmemann had little patience with those who wished to alter these rites. He suggested that the remedy to "misunderstandings" about the rites is to "simply listen to [the Church], and rather than imposing one's own presuppositions and inhibitions, to receive from her the real meaning of her rites" (*Of Water and the Spirit*, 133). Later he says, "One must not be only in error but, above all, *small* and *petty* to find 'offense' in these prayers" (*Of Water and the Spirit*, 138).

Related Language and Practices in Need of Alteration

There is more work to do than changing a few words in the First Day and Churching rites. In addition to excising the association between childbirth and impurity from the rites the following matters also need to be addressed: language relating to forgiveness (not confined to impurity) in these rites, the forty-day period of the mother's abstention from church attendance after childbirth, and the different treatments of female and male children during the Churching rite.

As noted earlier, Schmemann made the case that references to uncleanness and childbirth in the Churching rite actually refer to a more general, penitential approach to forgiveness of sins found in many Orthodox prayers. I showed that this is not the case, but here I propose that there is a place for beseeching general forgiveness for the mother in these rites. This thought rests not on the basis of an unsound connection between childbirth and impurity but on the reality that the woman has gone through a fraught experience: she has given birth and endured the first era of mothering, much of which may have been unpleasant, and she may (or may not) have committed sin during this time—whether related or unrelated to her childbearing. In this light, the act of asking for forgiveness on her behalf as she reenters church provides an umbrella of remission for her sins, possibly in lieu of her having to go to confession before returning to church (though it varies from parish to parish, an Orthodox Christian is typically expected to go to confession before receiving the Eucharist if she or he has been absent from church for three weeks or more). Therefore, this seeking of forgiveness is not only appropriate but also helps provide the sympathetic hospitality that rightly should be offered to the new mother.

The next concern is the period of time that elapses between childbirth and Churching. Leviticus specifies a period of forty days in the case of a male child and eighty days in the case of a female child. It is unclear at what point in Christian practice the period of forty days was embraced

for both sexes, but the period is indicated in the name of the rite itself: "Prayer for a Woman on the Fortieth Day of Childbirth." Of course, the period of forty days carries other typological significance in Christianity—Moses spent forty days in the desert, as did Christ—and this may be the reason that forty days was chosen as the time period for both female and male children.

Today, in the confusion about the putative connection between impurity and childbirth, the time period between childbirth and a return to church is explained to mothers in different ways. Some priests tell their mothers that it is a special time of "rest and recovery" granted to them because childbirth is so revered by the Church. Certainly, it is true that most women need some time to recover from the physical exertion of pregnancy and childbirth, to sleep and rest, to bond with their new child, and to establish breastfeeding, and therefore it is good for this to be mentioned in pastoral counseling about parenthood.[81] However, the notion that the Church designed a special period for a holy type of "R and R" is completely unsupported by the text and the rubrics; within the context of Churching, the time period is understood as a time of impurity that prohibits church attendance. Other priests indicate that mothers are so holy from their contact with God as co-creator that they have no need of the Eucharist or church attendance, and, indeed, must be brought back to earth through Churching. This approach was used by Schmemann in his verbal explanation of the forty-day period to his pregnant students,[82] and it requires a hermeneutic as generous as that used in his written explanations, recounted earlier in the chapter, of the meaning of the postpartum rites.

In current practice—and, again, situated in the confusion about the putative connection between impurity and childbirth—the length of time between childbirth and Churching varies widely and is based on many factors. Some circles take a literalist approach and insist on precisely

[81] Many women connect the Church's forty day time period with the usual four to six weeks of rest recommended by most doctors and midwives after childbirth.
[82] Alexandra Safchuk, personal interview, May 2014.

forty days. Others are flexible about the Churching date and either accommodate the family's schedule or simply hold the Churching on the Saturday or Sunday closest to the forty-day mark. In still other Orthodox environments, the mother thoughtfully plans the timing of the Churching in cooperation with her priest based on a variety of factors, such as the difficulty of her labor and recovery and the specifics of whether she is going back to work and when she is resuming other activities.

When the putative connection between childbirth and impurity is removed, the most reasonable and theologically sound approach is for the mother to be Churched after a period of rest and recovery but before she returns to her usual routines. When a mother is churched before returning to work or to her daily routine, her emergence from the immediate postpartum period is thus marked not by the demands of modern living but by the Church. This focus encourages the mother to orient her life as a mother toward that which is sacred. This orientation has characterized the good Christian life all along, and today it may be more important than ever because modern lives tend to be sharply divided between church time and secular time. In the midst of this reality, Churching presents a chance for the mother to order her world properly once again by first being Churched and then joining the secular world. Therefore, our group advocates for rubrics for an altered rite that clearly place the timing of the rite in the mother's hands and allow for the forty-day specification to be interpreted symbolically. In addition, we promote that Churching should take place publically, perhaps before Vespers or Liturgy, or—as it is celebrated in some places—within the context of Liturgy. In contrast to a private Churching (with just priest, mother, child, and father in attendance, which has become the custom in many places), a public Churching gives parishioners an opportunity to extend their own collective hospitality to the new mother and baby; it also reinforces the understanding that this rite is about proper orientation toward the divine, which always involves not just the nuclear family but also the Church family.

Removing the putative connection between childbirth and impurity also releases any effective ban on the mother's reception of the Eucharist. Again, one consequence of the ritual exclusion from church is that the mother is also excluded from receiving the Eucharist. She is unable to approach the chalice and pray, with the rest of the faithful, that this communion will serve the healing of her soul and body—healing that she may well need after performing the arduous task of childbirth. Thus this ban carries major consequences, and formal and public bans from the reception of the Eucharist are very rare in the Orthodox world and only given in response to the confession of grievous sin. This comparison—equivalence between a new mother receiving the Eucharist and someone who has willingly committed a significant sin—makes clear that prohibiting a woman from receiving communion on account of childbirth is a logically inconsistent position. A priest can offer the mother the opportunity to receive communion in her own home before Churching, just as would be done for any other homebound parishioner. This is practiced now in some instances, but could be practiced more widely.

Another Churching practice that must be considered in an alteration of the Churching rite is the practice of carrying only male infants, not female infants, around the altar. This discrepancy is dictated in the Slavic *Great Book of Needs*: "And if the child be a male, he brings him into the holy Altar (but if the child be a female, only as far as the Holy Doors)."[83] Although this practice seems to be fairly universal in current usage, this has not always been the case. Streett summarizes the practice's history in the following chronological list:

> The rite has ranged from (1) a pre-iconoclastic form where gender differences were not involved and the sanctuary played no role, to (2) a post-iconoclastic form where male and female children were both taken into the sanctuary, venerating three sides, male children also venerating the west side of the altar, to (3) inclusion of all baptized children from the sanctuary and exclusion of all unbaptized children, to (4) inclusion of unbaptized male

[83] "Prayers for a Woman on the Fortieth Day of Childbirth," *The Great Book of Needs*, 15.

> children and exclusion of female children. Orthodoxy looks to precedent, and the problem here is multiple, conflicting precedents. This is not to suggest that the rites went through such a system of even progression everywhere in the church, which rarely happens, but does illustrate snapshots of the rite through time and place. The key point here is that while gender differences did exist in earlier forms of the rite, those gender differences did not prevent the presence of female children in the sanctuary in earlier times. The gender discussion, then, is not whether bringing girls into the sanctuary is an innovation (which it is not), but whether restoration of the earlier, largely gender-blind practice is appropriate now.[84]

The alteration of this tradition—from both sexes being carried around the altar to only boys being carried around—came well after the introduction of the putative impurity of the mother into the rites. As late as the fifteenth century, Saint Symeon of Thessaloniki cites the practice of churching babies as part of the baptismal rite, including the bringing of (baptized) babies of both sexes through the sanctuary after the baptism.[85] This description points to the fact that this rite was bifurcated in the past into a pre-baptismal part and a post-baptismal part (yet another issue of practice to consider).[86] Presumably, this difference was instituted due to the fact that the broader practices and traditions of the altar do not allow unbaptized people to enter it. In order to resolve this exclusion of the unbaptized from the altar, the rite morphed into a form that celebrates the first part of Churching, followed by the baptism (either immediately, or in weeks or months), and then the final part of Churching, which includes the carrying of the baby around the altar.

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[84] Streett, "What to Do with the Baby?" 70.

[85] Ibid., 62–63. The Saint Tikhon's *Book of Needs* botches Symeon's report on the sexes and Churching, claiming that he describes different practices for male babies and female babies. Perhaps the organizer of this text conflates Saint Symeon's comments with later versions of the rite. A rough translation of what Saint Symeon says on the matter comes from Matthew Streett and shows that Symeon treats the sexes in the same way in terms of liturgical action: "If an infant [*to brephos*] has been baptized, he brings it to the altar, enters it and circles the altar, as if making a proskynesis, indicating it as dedicated to God, and makes obeisance to the creator. If the child [*to paidion*] is not yet baptized he stands before the two pillars, and makes an obeisance at the altar with the child. He returns it to the mother, and dismisses (her). From that time, then, the infant [*to brephos*] is a catechumen." Symeon, *De Sacramentis*, 60,unpublished translation by Matthew Streett, 2014.

[86] For an explanation of different traditions regarding this rite's timing and of the confusing directions given in most versions of *The Great Book of Needs*, see Schmemann, *Of Water and the Spirit*, 136–37. For a discussion of the different customs of the Byzantine rite as compared with the Slavic, see Ron Grove, "Baby Dedication in Traditional Christianity: Eastern Orthodox 'Churching' of Forty-Day-Olds," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 27, no. 1 (Winter 1990): 101–07.

This bifurcation of the Churching rite remains in practice today in some parishes, and it makes a certain amount of sense. As Calivas notes regarding the historical period in which the rite was split into these two parts, "Baptism and not the gender of the infant determined entrance into the sanctuary."[87] Therefore, the view of our postpartum rites group is, ideally, the second part of Churching should take place after Baptism and should involve both female and male children moving around the altar with the priest. If the second part of Churching takes places in conjunction with the first part, before baptism, then neither female nor male children should be carried around the altar.

Maternal Body: Conclusion

As noted earlier, the prayers of the postpartum rites are often the first things that a mother hears about Orthodoxy's understanding of motherhood. Unfortunately, given the lack of theological reflection on motherhood and the lack of catechetical materials on the topic, they may be the last words she ever hears on the subject. The Orthodox theology of motherhood articulated here is intended to correct this. There is no reason for a woman's first impression of motherhood in the context of the Church to be focused on the putative uncleanness of her body, which has just ushered a new human person into the world.

These poor theological concepts do harm to individual women, to women's (and to men's) vision of childbirth and motherhood, and to their understanding of their Church. Moreover, as long as these rites retain their current form, the existence of the rites themselves is threatened by the discomfort that they increasingly arouse, which is evidenced by the fact that they are frequently altered or ignored. Indeed, as long as these rites retain their current form, they call into question the theological integrity of the Orthodox understanding of childbirth and motherhood. Therefore,

[87] Calivas, *Aspects of Orthodox Worship*, 152.

alteration of the rites is necessary in order to bring them in line with the larger Orthodox embrace of the maternal body. Concomitantly, the Church needs a catechesis for motherhood—and for parenthood in general, and probably also for fatherhood in particular—in order for clergy to better understand family matters and be better equipped to minister to mothers and families. A catechesis is also needed for women and men as they prepare to become parents, perhaps when they are expecting a child for the first time, so that they can better understand and participate in the Orthodox theological vision of family.

Maternal Kinship: Hospitality

Two supposed functions of the Churching rite are to welcome the mother back to her church after childbirth and to welcome the baby to church for the first time. Where the Churching rite fails to do so, the iconography about a different postpartum celebration—the feast of the Birthgiver's Entranced into the Temple—succeeds. I turn now to this icon, as well as to the limited ways in which the current postpartum rites do offer hospitality and present ordered relationships of love.

Presentation of the Theotokos in the Temple, sixteenth century, Russia[88]

Presentation of the Theotokos in the Temple: Welcoming With Open Arms

I turn now to the presentation of the Birthgiver herself. Though, like the Birthgiver's purification, it is referred to as a presentation, it is not a purification rite for the Birthgiver's mother, Anna. Rather, the description of Anna's purification in the *Protoevangelium* suggests that she likely went alone for her purification: "And the days having been fulfilled, Anna was purified, and gave the breast to the child, and called her name Mary."[89] Thus, Anna's purification is not commemorated

[88] *Presentation of the Theotokos in the Temple*, Russia, December 5, 2008, http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Presentation_of_Virgin_Mary_(icon).jpg.
[89] *Protoevangelium of James*, trans. Alexander Walker, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 8, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing, 1886), rev. and ed. for New Advent by Kevin Knight, 2009, http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0847.htm, section 5.

by the Church; instead, the Church commemorates the feast of the Presentation of the Theotokos.[90] Its icon type, represented here by a typical sixteenth-century Russian icon, celebrates the occasion, remembered in the *Protoevangelium*, when the Birthgiver's parents brought her to the temple for the first time. Free from any connotations of impurity, this icon contains several examples of overt hospitality—a distinct welcoming of the Birthgiver and of her parents. In this way, it is instructive to a theology of motherhood, and more particularly to the quest to alter the postpartum rites, because it demonstrates a rite of welcome, albeit focused only on the child.

Anna chooses to bring the Birthgiver to the temple at the age of three years. The icon type of the Presentation of the Theotokos—which has few if any variants—shows many details from the *Protoevangelium*: the virgins that accompany the family of Anna, Joachim, and their daughter; the priest Zacharias (understood to be the father of John the Baptist) receiving the Birthgiver; and the image of the Birthgiver in the altar being fed by an angel. The following Psalm is often referenced along with this icon: "Listen, O daughter, behold and incline your ear; and forget your people and your father's house" (Ps. 44(45):11 SAAS)—reminding the viewer that the Birthgiver was not just presented, but came to stay in the temple from this point of her life onward, as was described in the *Protoevangelium* and widely accepted in tradition, and as is understood to be prefigured by the quotation from the Psalms.

The icon here shows Anna closest to her daughter, engaged in the presentation of her. In the *Protoevangelium*, Anna decides to wait until the Birthgiver is three years old, rather than bring her to the temple as an infant (presumably during her own purification), so that she will be more

[90] The presentation feast itself was likely inaugurated during the dedication of a basilica named for the Birthgiver in Jerusalem in the sixth century, and it appears to have been widely celebrated only in the late eighth and early ninth centuries. See C. Clark Carlton, "'The Temple that Held God': Byzantine Marian Hymnography and the Christ of Nestorius," *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 50, nos. 1–2 (2006): 99–125.

mature and "will not seek after father or mother."[91] Anna must know that the Birthgiver will go to live in the Holy of Holies—in other words, that Anna will not be bringing her daughter back home. What might be an occasion of bittersweet sentiment is portrayed seriously in the icon, yet it also strikes a bright, joyful tone. As in our example, the colors in Presentation icons are often vivid and strong, and Anna and Joachim look pleased with their daughter as she moves away from them.

For her part, the Birthgiver moves toward the priest, toward the temple, toward her future, with a sure step. She is seen in the altar in the top right of our icon, with an angel for company. This detail is given in the *Protoevangelium*, which records that an angel brought the Birthgiver bread during her time in the temple. As Vladimir Lossky observes, "It is the degree of contemplation, the 'pre-engagement with God', the start of the way of union during which the Holy Virgin will be 'nourished on holy bread.'"[92] Of course, viewers of this icon know both about Anna's maternal offering of her child to God and also about this child's future as the Mother of God. Thus the icon includes two visions of maternity: one of a pious mother dedicating her child to the Lord, the other of a mother-to-be beginning her preparation for a life of holiness.

The *Presentation* shown here contains a visual expression of liturgical hospitality. The priest Zacharias welcomes the Birthgiver with open arms. The angel, later, looks after her, providing her with nourishment. This is an image of hospitable greeting, and it speaks to the hospitality function that is still a part of Churching today: the new mother returns not to an empty church but to one full of her community, both living and dead, and she is welcomed through the practice of this rite. Yet the Churching rite also falls short due to its denigration of the mother's birthgiving. I spoke earlier of the act of willful conception as the ultimate invitation, the ultimate act of hospitality. This is true of all motherhood: It is an invitation to intimately share one's body, one's life, with another

[91] *Protoevangelium of James*, section 7.
[92] Vladimir Lossky, *The Meaning of Icons* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1999), 155–156.

person. The mother embraces this privilege when she chooses, in Chrysostom's words (as discussed in chapter 2), not just to bear but to *raise* her child. The Orthodox Church might offer a similar act of hospitality by welcoming mothers back into church after childbirth with a theologically sound and beautiful Churching rite. As Zacharias and the angel do for the Birthgiver, the Church ought to fully open its arms to its new mothers, whose bodies have experienced conception, pregnancy, and childbirth—whose bodies have bled and wept and been altered through their maternal experience.

Ultimately, hospitality is about kinship, about the welcoming of one by another (or others). Despite the problems with the Churching rite and the First Day rite, they do reveal Orthodoxy's welcoming intent toward the mother and the child as a pair coming to church. In doing so, they show respect for the kinship between mother and child, and for other kinship generated by motherhood—namely, the mother's connection with the Birthgiver herself, as well as with the mother's church community.

The Mother and Her Child, the Birthgiver and Her Church

How is kinship figured in the postpartum rites? In Schmemann's opinion, Churching was established as an act of hospitality toward mothers and infants who came to church together before the infant was formally received into the community through baptism. As Schmemann explains, "This rite is the liturgical expression and 'signification' first of all of a fact: the practice, common in the past to the entire Church, of the mother bringing her child, even before it was baptized, into the liturgical assembly of the Church. It was this fact, this practice, that the Church 'sanctioned' in the rite of churching, whose essential meaning, therefore, concerns not only baptism but also the Church's understanding of Christian family."[93] This development makes a strong statement about

[93] Schmemann, *Of Water and the Spirit*, 142–43.

the church's deference to, and welcoming of, the kinship between mother and child.[94] This kinship is acknowledged both in the very existence of the rite and in the fact that as part of the rite the priest blesses the mother and child as a unit by making the sign of the cross over them. As Zacharias did literally to the young Birthgiver, the Church here figuratively opens its arms in welcome to the mother and child.

Schmemann concludes that the mother and child's presence together in Church for the first time affirms their fundamental unity: "The main characteristic of this rite is that in it the mother and child are totally *united*, form so to speak *one* human reality and thus *one* object of blessing, sanctification and prayer."[95] Indirectly, this perspective also helps a consideration of what these prayers are *not*: They are not a celebration of the family unit; the father is mentioned only obliquely in a short prayer for both parents at the end. Rather, these services are focused exclusively on mother and child. This focus may in part be functional; in the past, the women and children stood in a different side of the church than did the men. In any case, Churching especially presents and honors the mother and child as a unit; their kinship is singled out and valued as being different from relationships involving other units, and their unit is welcomed by the Church.

Like the hymnography remembered in chapter 4, the postpartum rites also signify the relationship between a new mother and the Birthgiver. For example, First Day includes the following lines: "O Master, Lord our God, Who wast born of our Most-holy Sovereign Lady, the Theotokos and Ever-Virgin Mary; Who, as an infant, didst lay in a manger and wast carried as a little child: Do Thou Thyself have mercy on this, Thy handmaid who has given birth today to this

[94] This signification also includes deference to and celebration of children, who in the Orthodox Church are typically baptized as infants, able to receive the Eucharist, and considered to be full members of the Church. This approach is based on Jesus Christ's full acceptance of children and his encouragement of his followers to be like children.
[95] Schmemann, *Of Water and the Spirit*, 143.

child."[96] Thus, through the reminder of Christ's birth and his own mother's care of him, the new mother is connected with the Birthgiver. As Schmemann writes, "The Church, in her prayers, unites those two motherhoods, fills human motherhood with the unique joy and fullness of Mary's divine Motherhood."[97] As in the investigation of the Birthgiver's childbirth in chapter 4, here again the Church's overt connection between the Mother of God and all other human mothers is seen. The Birthgiver is a mother whose own mothering experience serves as a source of connection, of kinship, between the Birthgiver and any other human mother.

The Church also offers the new mother hospitality in the Churching rites. The mother is not "worlded" but "Churched," and her experience as a mother is affirmed by these rites to be primarily ecclesial rather than economic, societal, or commercial. Indeed, Churching grounds the whole family's world in the Church. The mother and child are accompanied by the father, any other children, and perhaps grandparents and godparents, and, though the rite does not mention all of these kin, they too experience the reframing of reality that the Church offers to mother and child in Churching. Therefore, this rite serves as another way in which the Church links its members as family, both in biological or kinship units and as a greater spiritual family—with connections to those in the parish, those elsewhere in the world, and those who have already passed into the next life.

Conclusions and Possibilities

The changes outlined here for First Day and Churching are necessary both for the health of the Church and for a proper theological expression of its views on motherhood. Other work also needs to be done relating to mothers in the postpartum time period. Rather than experiencing a rupture

[96] "Prayers on the First Day After a Woman Has Given Birth to a Child," *The Great Book of Needs*, 4.
[97] Ibid., 146.

in her churchly life between the time she gives birth and the time she returns to church, the mother needs an atmosphere of prayer and loving assistance. This atmosphere can be supported by herself, in prayer and consecration of her child; by her family, in their prayers and in their care for her; and by her church community members, who pray for her, visit her, and supply her family with meals and support.

In addition to this formation of an atmosphere of care around the new mother, more liturgical changes are needed for the postpartum time. For example, other jurisdictions would benefit from adopting the aforementioned miscarriage rite alterations that originated in the Orthodox Church in America. The Church would also likely benefit from other rites that pertain to both motherhood and fatherhood, such as an adoption rite. In the case of an adopted baby, the Churching rite can be used, and, in the case of an older adopted child who is joining the Orthodox Church, the prayers for adult catechumens can be used, but a rite specific to adoption would acknowledge both the grace that is present in adoption and its own special version of hospitality. Furthermore, consideration might be given to the inclusion of the role of the father and of the godparents in these rites.

Despite the many alterations needed in the current postpartum rites, both rites must continue as life-giving modes of liturgical hospitality. The Orthodox Church is the only Christian community to offer this particular form of hospitality to its new mothers and children. First Day prayers include a beautiful request for protection for the mother during this intense time: "Cover her with the shelter of Thy wings from this day until her final end,"[98] which is just as consoling in the twenty-first century as it was a millennium ago. This sort of care and hospitality is just what is needed when a mother first returns to church after childbirth, and it is also needed by the child. David Bentley Hart writes, "The idea of the infinite value of every particular life does not accord

[98] "Prayers on the First Day After a Woman Has Given Birth to a Child," *The Great Book of Needs*, 3.

with instinct, as far as one can tell, but rather has a history."[99] Part of that history consists of these postpartum services. Every time a mother and her newborn stand at the western door of a church, waiting for the priest to sign the cross over them to begin the Churching, the infinite value of the new life—of that particular baby—is celebrated.

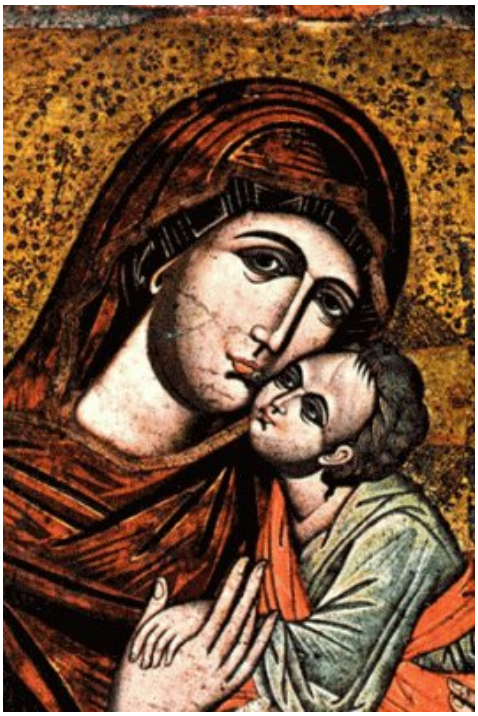
If First Day and Churching are not altered, then they are likely to fall out of use, at least in the United States. In a cautionary note, Streett describes the fate of the Churching rite in the Christian West: "In the Roman Catholic Church since Vatican II, instead of re-evaluating the rite the compilers of the ritual have simply eliminated and reduced it to a single petition incorporated into the baptismal rite."[100] Indeed, the case for altering these rites and creating a theologically sound and beautiful welcome for mothers and infants is made stronger by the specter of losing them entirely, which is a good possibility as priests continue to alter and even drop them.

I grew up in a tiny, elderly Orthodox parish in southern West Virginia, and the first time I witnessed a Churching rite was in my own churching with my firstborn. I did not even know that the rite existed, so I simply returned to church when I felt like it, which, coincidentally or not, was about forty days after childbirth. I heard the bits about impurity, and they jarred and confused me—offered as they were with no explanation whatsoever—but I also heard the rest of the rite. After experiencing a dangerous delivery myself, I heard the priest say, "O Lord God Almighty, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, Who . . . hast brought all things from nothingness into being, we pray and entreat thee: Thou hast saved this thy servant, Carrie, by thy will."[101] I looked down at my son and marveled that he was brought from nothingness into being, and I thought about my own difficult birth experience, from which I certainly felt saved. I was grateful for this welcome back

[99] David Bentley Hart, "The Anti-Theology of the Body," in *In the Aftermath: Provocations and Laments* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 147.
[100] Streett, "What to Do with the Baby?" 68.
[101] "Prayers for a Woman on the Fortieth Day of Childbirth," *The Great Book of Needs*, 10-11.

into my church community. Flawed though it was, it felt like a homecoming. I wish for this to be the case, with the rites unencumbered by their theologically invalid dross, for all mothers' experience of their own churching.

Epilogue



Lovingkindness or *Glykophilousa*, seventeenth century, Crete[1]

This theology of motherhood includes both descriptive theology and constructive theology—descriptive in that it illuminates Orthodox theological sources addressing motherhood and constructive in that it draws theological conclusions and makes recommendations about engaging motherhood in the Orthodox Church. The balance between these elements is not static; rather, my work grows progressively prescriptive throughout these chapters. It is true that contemplation of the key sources is meaningful in itself. Indeed, as noted in chapter 1, part of my motivation for articulating a theology of motherhood is simply to highlight and examine the ample existing Orthodox sources on motherhood, which have gone largely uninvestigated. However,

[1] *Lovingkindness* or *Glykophilousa*, Crete, http://www.iconsexplained.com/iec/iec_177_vierge_glykophilousa.htm. In Maria Donadeo, *Icônes de la Mère de Dieu*, (Paris, France: Éditions Médiaspaul, 1987), 61.

additional work is also needed in order for the Orthodox Church to fully realize a theology of motherhood and therefore be truly able to guide and support its mothers and families.

The mounting sense of prescriptiveness in this project was not planned; rather, it emerged due to the ordering of chapters according to the stages of biological motherhood. It also prepares the way for this epilogue, in which I offer further recommendations related to a theology of motherhood. These recommendations come with the conviction that even though the Orthodox Church is proudly and firmly grounded in tradition, there are still *frontiers* in Orthodox Christianity; that is, there is more to be said and more work to be done. Both change and further greatness are known to be possible, as affirmed in the words of Jesus Christ himself: "Most assuredly, I say to you, he who believes in Me, the works that I do he will do also; and greater works than these he will do, because I go to My Father" (John 14:12, NKJV). I imagine and hope that further theological work on motherhood, women, and family will be part of these "greater works" that Jesus Christ prophesied.

One of these frontiers—one of these "greater works"—has to do with women joining the theological chorus. As noted in chapter 1, it is only now in all of history that a significant number of theologically trained women are participating in Orthodox theology in a public, recognized manner. I am often asked questions such as these: "What do women bring to Orthodox theology that men do not?" "How does having women theologians change Orthodox theology?" My answer is something like, "How would we know? Women have only recently started to contribute to the Orthodox theological conversation!" Regardless of one's convictions about—or objections to—supposed ontological qualities of women, the tone and tenor of Orthodox theology that includes women is just beginning to be heard.

The addition of women theologians will prompt another "greater work:" that of the whole Orthodox theological chorus—female and male—turning to questions about roles and possibilities

for women, including mothers, in the Church. This is not to say that all theologians, whether female or male, will or should make it their life's work to examine the place of women in the Orthodox Church. However, the inclusion of women's voices will inevitably enhance and deepen ongoing theological conversations on the roles, meaning, and significance of both women and men in the Church, including matters of motherhood and family. Nor do I suggest that this enhancement of the theological conversation should happen only at the level of certified scholars. Rather, this conversation will be beneficial at many levels and in many locations, including in theological and historical scholarship, in assemblies of bishops and church leadership gatherings, in parishes among clergy and laity, and in church school for children and religious formation classes for adults. I now point to a few topics for theological conversation specific to mothers and women in the church, and I do so in terms of the categories that structure much of this project: maternal body and maternal kinship.

Maternal Body

In composing this theology of motherhood, I located and examined several sources that contribute theological perspectives for understanding the maternal body. For example, Saint Anna's story, along with the icon of her and her husband eagerly anticipating the conception of their child, set the stage for an Orthodox understanding both of marital sexuality as holy and of the body as a blessed part of the act of conception. Similarly, the *Ustyug Annunciation* and *Visitation* icons show shadowy images of the unborn in their mothers' wombs, thus fostering esteem for the maternal body, which is also underscored by the importance of the Birthgiver's own maternal body in the very development and defense of icons. In addition, the hymnographic and theological tradition embracing the Birthgiver's maternal body—both as having experienced labor sensation and as having been altered by childbirth—protects Jesus Christ's sanctification of childbirth by virtue of

his having experienced his own birth, thus allowing the Birthgiver to be a special sister in birthgiving to all women. In contrast, the postpartum rites are exceptional in that they offer little that is congruent with Orthodox approaches to the maternal body in other contexts. If altered effectively, however, they hold great promise for inspiring in each new mother a powerful and constructive vision of her own maternal body and of her Church's theology of motherhood.

Thus, a considerable amount of Orthodox source material on motherhood offers an embrace of embodied maternal existence, from marital conjugality through pregnancy and birth. This embrace aptly reflects the revelation of Jesus Christ's sanctification of the embodied human experience, as well as the Church's teaching that the body is part of the original fashioning of humans and is intimately connected with each person's sanctification and path to eternity. To return to the words of John of Damascus: "I do not venerate matter, I venerate the fashioner of matter, who became matter for my sake and accepted to dwell in matter and through matter worked my salvation, and I will not cease from reverencing matter, through which my salvation was worked."[2] John of Damascus wrote these words in defense of icons, but they extend to a defense of a real veneration of matter in the form of the human body, through which—as he notes—salvation is worked. This strong reverence for the body is included in the theological anthropology offered in this project.

At the same time, investigation of Orthodox sources addressing the maternal body also shows that aberrant and dualistic strands of thinking about the body have interfered with Christian thought and practice for centuries. At times, these ways of thinking prevent a full embrace of the maternal body by the Orthodox Church, as evidenced by the introduction of the theologically unsound connection between impurity and childbirth into the postpartum rites. Such departures

[2] John of Damascus, "Treatise I on the Divine Images," in *Three Treatises on the Divine Images*, trans. Andrew Louth, (Crestwood, NY: Saint Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2003), 1.16, 29.

from the Orthodox view of the body come in the form of what I will call "monolapsarianism"—theological anthropology primarily based neither on the original creation, nor on the revelation of Jesus Christ, nor on the life in the age to come, but instead focused exclusively on the Fall. This way of thinking proposes a vision of human bodies and human sexuality as irredeemably disordered by the failure of the first humans to thrive in the Garden and thus creates a dualistic understanding of body and soul, which then culminates in a negative view of sexuality, procreation, and childbearing.

Monolapsarianism works against the understanding of the human person as a whole being. As David Bentley Hart writes, "The 'living soul' of whom scripture speaks . . . is a single corporeal and spiritual whole, a person whom the breath of God has awakened from nothingness."[3] In light of monolapsarianism, it is necessary to better articulate an Orthodox theological anthropology of the body that takes into account the original creation, the Fall, and the redeeming actions of Jesus Christ—including his Incarnation, baptism, Transfiguration, Crucifixion, and Resurrection. A fully developed Orthodox theological anthropology of the body is critical to a theological understanding of that understands the human person as "a single corporeal and spiritual whole."

Such a nuanced theological anthropology also carries important implications for a theological understanding of sex and gender. Although equality between women and men in dignity and deification has been asserted from the earliest days of the Church, the question of who female and male *are* in terms of ontological traits is a fairly new question in Orthodox thought, driven perhaps by the contemporary secular world's concern with gender (a great irony, given the strong overlap between those in the Church who lament secular culture's infringement upon Orthodoxy and those who wish to define the ontological qualities of females and males). Orthodox theology

[3] David Bentley Hart, "The Anti-Theology of the Body," in *In the Aftermath: Provocations and Laments* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 147.

maintains a long-held respect for the idea that women and men are complementary. However, it is one thing to assert that women and men are complementary in a mystical manner—as the Church does—and another to ascribe a legalistic list of innate qualities to female and male. Doing so risks saddling women and men with constraining, pigeonholing traits that do not reflect the diversity of qualities exhibited by human persons. Moreover, the effects of such theologizing, even when well-intentioned, have often been deleterious for women, and, a theological anthropology that understands the male body as properly Christian but the female body as gnostic—whether this is stated directly or simply manifests itself in the ways women are spoken of and treated—is not true to Orthodoxy's broader and longstanding commitment to the ontological equality of women and men.

As reviewed earlier, many sources cited in this work regarding the maternal body support and expand a fully realized Orthodox theological anthropology. For example, as seen in the following two hymns by Ephrem the Syrian, the maternal body, represented here by the Birthgiver's maternal body, is something to be marveled at and rejoiced over:

As indeed He sucked Mary's milk,
He has given suck—life to the universe.
As again He dwelt in His mother's womb,
In His womb dwells all creation.[4]

She gave Him milk from what He made exist.
She gave Him food from what He had created.
He gave milk to Mary as God.
In turn, He was given suck by her as human.[5]

With Orthodoxy's many sources that examine and celebrate the human person—body and soul—a theology of motherhood offers a new lens for viewing theological anthropology. A theology of

[4] Ephrem the Syrian, "Hymns on Nativity," Hymn 4, 184–85, in *Ephrem the Syrian, Hymns*, trans. Kathleen E. McVey (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1989), 102.
[5] Ibid., Hymn 4, 153–54, in *Ephrem the Syrian,* 100.

motherhood illumines the ways in which Jesus Christ sanctified and blessed the human embodied experience. Not only did he breathe, and walk, and hug, and weep; he also lived in the womb, moved through his mother's birth canal out into the wider world, nursed at her breast, and slept in her arms. He personally participated in the universal human experience of having a mother. In so doing, he blessed all aspects of the embodied human experience, including those of a vulnerable infant and those of a birthgiving mother. This fact must be held at the forefront of any efforts in theological anthropology.

Maternal Kinship

In addition to contemplating the maternal body through Orthodox sources on motherhood, I similarly examine the concept of maternal kinship. Whereas the Orthodox sources on the maternal body lend themselves to one unifying affirmation of the body, the Orthodox sources on maternal kinship lend themselves to many points for contemplation involving the significance of the relationships between mother and child and between mother and God. The Orthodox sources on conception, including John Chrysostom's musings on motherhood and the Annunciation icon and story, illustrate that pre-conceptive prayer is formative of the relationships involved in motherhood and that maternal kinship is ordered by an understanding of the intertwined nature of free will and grace. The Visitation icon and story, with its reference to John the Baptist's leap in his mother's womb when he encounters Jesus Christ through her, illustrates the possibility of an encounter with God through maternal kinship and hints at ways in which mother and child might listen for God together. Other icons—the two variations of the Nativity of Jesus Christ—also offer a vision of a mother's encounter with God; the version depicting an upright Birthgiver shows her authentic maternal relationship with him, and the more ancient version showing her turned away with a pensive gaze offers an example of maternal contemplation to be emulated by mothers and all

people. A final icon, of the Presentation of the Birthgiver, gives a visual example of the Church's hospitality toward the new mother and her child—one that rightly orders maternal kinship and can be included in the postpartum rites to shape the mother's return to church with a sense of warm welcome. In their various ways, all of these sources present a theology of motherhood that views maternal relationships as centered on both free will and grace, and as being well ordered when framed by encounters with God through prayer, contemplation, and hospitality.

As I suggest at various points in this theology of motherhood, iconography can serve as a touchstone in understanding and experiencing maternal kinship. Icons that depict mothers invite their maternal viewers to contemplate the sanctity of motherhood. For instance, when one gazes at the *Ustyug Annunciation*, one might gain new appreciation for the Church's understanding of maternity, including the mother-child relationship that begins at conception. A mother might also feel a sense of kinship with the Birthgiver of God, who also carried a child for nine months and experienced labor and delivery, as well as the intense, fresh days of new motherhood.

At several points in this theology of motherhood, I advocate for the preservation of variations of icon types. I also wish to acknowledge that just as the contribution that women will make to Orthodox theology is not yet known, this is also the case for women in the arena of iconography. In my informal observation, variations—such as the upright Birthgiver in the Nativity icon and the Visitation icon with visible babes in the womb—are flourishing under female hands and are becoming more common in the Orthodox world. As the number of women iconographers grows, I am excited to see what the next few decades hold, both in terms of preserving ancient variations and in terms of perhaps "greater things" in developing new icon types.

One consistent theme of maternal kinship in iconographic depictions of motherhood involves the connection between motherhood and love, which is intimated in the history of the development of Marian images encountered in chapter 2. Those images point to the conclusion that

motherhood and God are inseparable. Not only did Jesus Christ come into the world through a mother—an entrance that was necessary in order for him to become fully human—but also Jesus Christ cannot be properly conceived, so to speak, without his mother. When Jesus Christ and his mother are rightly encountered, an effort that is enriched by iconography, the Birthgiver's maternal love is seen as God-like. Leonid Ouspensky offers an extended meditation on the connection between the love conveyed in maternal icons of the Birthgiver and the divine qualities of maternal love:

> Every human feeling expressed in an icon becomes transfigured and acquires its full meaning in its contact with the world of Divine Grace. Icons of Lovingkindness are perhaps the most striking example of this fact. In all the great variety of human feelings those connected with motherhood are the most intense, for more than any others they are connected not only with the inner but also with the physical life of man. In the icons of Lovingkindness, the motherly caress of the Mother of God is indissolubly connected with her tormenting pain for Her Son. This compassion she feels for Him becomes here transformed into motherly compassion for all creatures for whom He voluntarily sacrifices Himself. And this godlike compassion transfigures the most instinctive part of human nature, which links man to the whole of creation—motherhood. Contact with the Deity transforms motherly tenderness into all-embracing love and grief for the whole of creation."[6]

In Ouspensky's analysis, the message conveyed in the Lovingkindness icon of the Birthgiver (as in the example reproduced at the beginning of this epilogue), and in other icons of her, is that her maternal love is the most God-like love available in the human context. This is not disembodied love; it involves the whole person—the physical in the maternal body and the soul in maternal kinship. Both of these loves are palpable in the example of the *Lovingkindness* icon shown above. This God-like maternal love reaches its perfection in the Birthgiver herself, but it is also found in all mothers who choose, in Chrysostom's words, not just to bear but to *raise* their children.

[6] Leonid Ouspensky, "The Meaning and Language of Icons," in *The Meaning of Icons* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1999), 93.

Conclusion

I began this project as a personal search for theological perspectives on motherhood in Orthodoxy. Along the way, I expanded the project in the belief that if *I* sensed the consequences of the lack of theological reflection about motherhood, then so did other mothers. In this sense, this project is about and for my fellow mothers. In addition, as I encountered the various source materials on motherhood, I began to realize that this project has yet another *telos*, another ultimate purpose: It is also about and for the Orthodox Church. Here in the twenty-first century, the Church—as a body of theologians, faithful, clergy, and monastics—will consider motherhood from multiple perspectives: as part of its grappling with theological anthropology in terms of the body and female and male, as part of its reevaluation of its rites, as part of its development of iconography, as part of its growing understanding of kinship, and as part of a new theological era in which women, including mothers, are fully engaged in the theological conversation of the Church. These, indeed, will be "greater works."

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