

## "Mothers, God and the Church"

Homily of May 12, 2002

by Fr. Brian Joyce

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At Presentation time, we will hear a familiar song with the words, 'Gentle Woman, peaceful dove Teach us wisdom; teach us love.'

"Gentle Woman," when you hear that or pray that, the woman can be Mary, could be your mother, could be God, on good authority. Pope John Paul I referred to God as "Woman" and as "Mother." And the new Catholic catechism says that to understand God, we have to understand God as masculine, as feminine, and as more than that. But the word "woman" is not the one that troubles me. It is the word "gentle."

Here we are, Mother's Day.... "gentle woman." Give me a break! You know, being a mother, you have to be one tough cookie! And I think, growing up, as children of our mothers, we don't know that and we don't notice it. I'll give you one good example. There is a best-selling book, "Angela's Ashes," written by Frank McCort. And his mother Angela, in it, he remembers as a child and describes her as "passive," as "helpless," as "staring into the ashes." That's where the title comes from, doing nothing more than smoking her woodbines, her Irish cigarettes.

Well, I want to tell you. Angela came to the United States with her family. Two friends of mine (One is an editor for the New York Times and the other edits Commonweal Magazine.) hired her to raise and care for their children. And when they read the book, they wrote a review of it headlined, "It ain't the Angela we knew! She was one tough take-charge woman."

I think our society doesn't recognize the importance and the strength of mothers. I just read this yesterday. Let me share it with you.

*A friend of mine went to the County Clerk's office to renew her driver's license. 'Do you have a job or are you just a....' the recorder asked her. My friend, fuming, snapped, 'Of course I have a job. I'm a mother!' The recorder replied, 'We don't list mother as an occupation. 'Housewife' covers it.' (..She didn't think she was married to the house.)*

*Well, I found myself in the same situation one day when I was at our town hall. The clerk, obviously a career woman, poised, efficient and possessed of a high-sounding title like 'official interrogator' or 'town registrar' asked, 'And what is*

*your occupation?' I don't know where they came from but all of a sudden the words popped out of my mouth, 'I am a research associate in the field of child development and human relations.' The clerk paused, pen frozen in mid-air. I repeated the title slowly, 'I am a research associate in the field of child development and human relations.' The clerk wrote my pompous title in bold black ink on the official questionnaire. The clerk said, 'Might I ask just what you do in your field?' I replied, 'I have a continuing program of research, in the laboratory and in the field. Of course, the job is one of the most demanding in the Humanities, and I often work fourteen hours a day for the job is more challenging than most run-of-the-mill careers and the rewards are in satisfaction rather than just money.' There was an increasing note of respect in the clerk's voice. She completed the form, stood up, and personally escorted me to the door. As I drove into our driveway, buoyed by my glamorous new career, I was greeted by three of my lab assistants, ages 13, 7, and 3. And upstairs I could hear our next experimental model, six months old, in the child development program, testing out a new vocal pattern."*

...Gentle woman!

You know, we also celebrate this weekend the feast of the Ascension. We moved it from Thursday, Ascension Thursday, to the Sunday weekend because it is such an important feast and on Thursday we are all at work, and we call it a holy day, but we can't show up. So we are here to celebrate the Ascension of Jesus. Now what we celebrate is not His going up. This is not the elevator feast of the Church, or the astronaut feast. What we celebrate is His sending us out, the great commissioning of us to be the Church, His sending out the Church to make a difference in the world.

Have you noticed the World isn't doing so well? Have you noticed the Church isn't doing so well? You know, the first reading told us He addressed them "Men of Galilee." Maybe He should have sent the women.... And actually He did. In the early Church, people like Priscilla and Lydia were key in the building up of the Church, not to mention Mary Magdalene who was the first Apostle, the Apostle to the Apostles. She was sent to announce the Resurrection of Jesus. But over the years it has gotten out of whack and out of balance. So I am going to suggest some questions about God, about society, about our Church, that we think about on this Women's Day, this Mother's Day.

About God.... What sort of God do we think of and pray to? What is She like? (And the Bible suggests it's OK to call God "She.") What if God is like a mother? And the Bible says She is. Then I would think the basic things about our God are life-giving, suffering for us and with us, more often coaxing us and cajoling us than controlling us and commanding us. And the bottom line, finally, our Mother, our God, lets go so that we can walk on our own and we can grow up and live on our own. What kind of a God do you think of and pray to?

Secondly, our society....What sort of a society do we hope for? On this Mother's Day, think of the values that we associate with women and with mothers? I would think we would hope for a society with the values of the priority of life and of life-giving, rather than life-destroying, decisions being made, where nurturing and compassion and being gentle (but as strong as it takes!) are the values brought to the tables of leadership and negotiation and world planning.

And what about the Church? What sort of Church do we plan for? I would recommend a Church where women and their gifts play a strong role in leadership. I have to be honest about this. If you think about it, go back thirty, forty years. I would suggest our Church, in the United States at least, was far ahead on that agenda. For example, if thirty-five years ago you went to a meeting of all the hospital directors and hospital corporation presidents in the United States, they would have all been male, except for the Catholic hospitals where women religious were the CEO's and Directors and Presidents.

Better example: If thirty years ago, you went to an association of all the private universities and colleges, even colleges like Mills College, women- only, in Oakland, Smith, back east, women-only, all the Presidents were men, except for the Catholic colleges and universities where women religious had control and leadership. But I think we have slipped far behind our society in the last thirty years and gone far back. And I really think what the Church needs is women in leadership roles, women like my mother who, one of the first times she heard me preach from a pulpit, shook her finger at me and said, "You priests, when you're in the pulpit, think you are six feet above contradiction!" My mother ....and most of you are even too young to remember this generation, but in the 1940's and before, Catholics were forbidden to join Protestant organizations of any kind. And I signed up to take swimming lessons at the YMCA. And the parish priest came and explained to my mother that I couldn't do that because that was basically a Protestant organization. And when he walked out the door, she stood and said to me, "Isn't that the silliest thing you've ever heard in your life?" And I went swimming.

Women like my mother whose favorite proverb is the Spanish one, "An ounce of mother is better than a pound of clergy." I would suggest that what the Church needs today is some wives for its clergy and some women among its ordained priesthood. (Applause!) And it might not be better in each and every case, but it would be broader and richer to allow the Spirit to sweep through the Church as God might will. So, when you hear that song, you might pray it to your mother, to Mary, or to God. But be sure to pray for our society and for our Church.

Gentle woman, peaceful dove; Teach us wisdom; teach us love. Amen.

