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A Day For Everyone to Celebrate

Mother is a word of Old English origin which seems to relate to many other languages that bear similar letters-- like the German *Mutter* . Is it because the reality of motherhood had carried across boundaries and was a term used so frequently that strangers came to recognize it on other tongues? Of one thing we can be sure. Every human being has a mother. Maybe no siblings but always a mother, the sure relative that our human existence guarantees. When Jesus laments the refusal of his countrymen to accept him, he uses a moving maternal metaphor, “Jerusalem, how often have I yearned to gather your children as a mother bird gathers her young under her wings!” (Mt 23:37).

The celebration of motherhood has a very old history. The ancient Greeks, observing the fertility of springtime, honored Rhea, the Mother of the god Zeus, with a special feast. In the seventeenth century, England held a Mothering Sunday. It was a time when servants had a vacation day in order to be able to return to their homes to spend time with their mothers and perhaps bring with them the sweet nourishment of a *mothering cake*. Restaurants certainly carry on this tradition with special menus for the second Sunday of May.

In 1872, America’s first Mother’s Day began with Julia Ward Howe, the author of the words in the *Battle Hymn of the Republic* . Peace was the theme of the gatherings held in Boston—a mother being recognized as someone who wants to foster harmony among her children. The effort to establish a national Mother’s Day originated in 1907 in Philadelphia and was finally proclaimed as an American holiday in 1914. The second Sunday of May became a day for all children to pause and gaze with gratitude at the parent who had suffered the pain of childbirth to give them life, the one who dedicated herself to their early needs, who continues to guide them with loving care.

Not every child knows his or her biological mother and may have to wait until eternity to recognize her. Then both will feel the warmth of their postponed embrace. The wonder of mother love is so strong that we use it to express an affection of the highest order. “You are like a mother to me.” We say this to aunts, older sisters, relatives, and unrelated women who have entered our lives with a blessing of such magnitude that only the word *mother* can describe its warmth.

God has given us the unsurpassable model of motherhood in His own Mother Mary. We assign her titles that reflect what mothers are to their offspring. Mother of Good Counsel: how often did we hear words like these from our own mother, “Be quiet and listen to what I have to say to you.” Mother of Mercy: “It’s all right. We’ll work on this and things will be much better.” We address Mary as “Our life, our sweetness, and our hope” and those invocations make sense to us from personal experience of being a child.

The Jesuit, Gerard Manley Hopkins, wrote a poem whose title conveys his awareness of the pervasive presence of Mary in our earthly lives: *The Blessed Virgin Compared to the Air We Breathe*. It begins, "World-mothering air, nestling me everywhere." It goes on to say, "Be thou, then, O thou dear/ Mother, my atmosphere."

Motherhood is so powerful a reality in human existence that saints have used it to explain God's love for us. In the 11th century, St Anselm wrote of God as one who is Mother to us. The 14th century English anchoress Julian of Norwich is perhaps the most famous mystic to invoke God as mother. To Julian, mother always means a consoling presence—a positive, strengthening figure who affirms us, who supports us consistently with gentleness. The sense of God as Mother evoked in her a powerful response of answering love. She writes, "I saw that God rejoices to be our Father and God rejoices to be our Mother." She then moves on to the Trinity. "For the Almighty Truth of the Trinity is our Father, for God made us and keeps us. And the deep wisdom of the Trinity is our Mother in whom we are enclosed." Julian does not neglect "this sweet maiden, His blessed mother, our Lady Saint Mary." She observes, "It is as if He (Christ) said, 'Will you see in her how you are loved?'"

To express the overwhelming abundance of divine love, poured out on earthly beings, the anchoress declares, "Our Mother Christ...in mercy reforms and restores us." She had no academic training in theology, but pondering divine goodness in the depths of her prayer, she reflects, "By the foreseeing endless counsel of all the blessed Trinity, God willed that the Second Person should become our Mother, our Brother, our Savior." She then repeats, "Whereof it follows that as truly as God is our Father, so truly is God our Mother."

We use the phrase Mother Church to show the current of affection that flows within the Mystical Body of Christ. St. Therese of Lisieux declared, "In the heart of the Church, my Mother, I will be love." Earlier, the Spanish St. Teresa of Avila, as her life drew to its conclusion, declared, "I am a daughter of the Church." Many, many centuries before, Isaiah could think of no better image for Divine Mercy speaking to us, "As one whom a mother comforts, so I will comfort you. You shall see and your heart shall rejoice" (66:13,14)

On this second Sunday of May, when we pray for the woman who has nurtured our human life, let us move away from the busyness and noise of our twenty-first century existence and fall silent in a peaceful gladness for the treasure each mother is. "I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a child quieted at its mother's breast, like a child that is quieted is my soul" (Ps 131:2).

Happy Mother's Day to all mothers and to all who love children, the young ones and the old ones.

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