The Oldest Vocation
Atkinson, Clarissa W.

Published by Cornell University Press

Atkinson, Clarissa W.
The Oldest Vocation: Christian Motherhood in the Medieval West.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/68525

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2414106
CHAPTER ONE

Christian Motherhood:
“Who Is My Mother?”

According to a very old story, a woman pope ruled the Church of Rome for a few years in the middle of the ninth century. Her name was Joan, and as a young woman she lived in England, where she fell in love with a traveling student who was a monk. (Before there were universities, most students were monks, and the intellectually curious among them moved from library to library and from teacher to teacher, in search of books and instruction.) Monks were not allowed to marry, but Joan was brave as well as beautiful and brilliant, and she joined her lover in his studies and travels, wearing male clerical clothing for safety and concealment. The two wandered through Europe, acquiring vast learning, until the man died and Joan was left alone. She continued to study and to dress like a monk: Boccaccio, who told the story in the fourteenth century, said that she refused “to attach herself to anyone else or acknowledge that she was a woman.”¹ Eventually she found her way to Rome, where her outstanding virtue and learning were rewarded with election to the papal throne.

Joan reigned as pope for a time, with nobody the wiser. Boccaccio remarked: “This woman was not afraid to mount the Fisherman’s throne, to deal with all the sacred mysteries and proffer them to

THE OLDEST VOCATION

others, something which the Christian religion does not allow to any woman.” Such audacity was soon punished. Boccaccio says that the devil tormented her with lust and “the Pope happened to become pregnant. Oh, what a shameful crime!” Joan’s celebrated wisdom did not help her to appreciate the implications of her condition, or even to recognize the beginning of labor. During a solemn procession through the streets of Rome, the pope gave birth and died in shameful agony.

In the salacious iconography that surrounds this story, Joan frequently is depicted lying in the street in a crowd of horrified onlookers, a triple crown on her head and an infant emerging from beneath the papal robes. Lawrence Durrell, working with a modern Greek version of the legend, captured the chaotic, sacrilegious atmosphere of visual representations of Joan’s travail:

Great was the consternation when a premature infant was produced from among the voluminous folds of the papal vestments. The attending archdeacons recoiled in horror while the great circle of worshippers pressed in even closer, screaming and crossing themselves. Women climbed on the backs of their menfolks for a better view, while those already mounted on horses and mules stood in the saddle until the deacons were forced to use their standards and crucifixes as clubs to hew a passage through the mob.

The uses to which the story has been put are no more edifying than its iconography. It gave Boccaccio an opportunity to castigate

2. Ibid., p. 232.
3. In most versions of the tale, she died in the street; in Boccaccio’s story, the cardinals put Joan in prison, “where this wretched woman died in the midst of her laments.” On the implications of the story for his own time, Boccaccio noted that “when the Pope goes on a procession with the clergy and the people... when they reach the place where Joan gave birth, the Pope turns away and takes different streets because of his hatred for that place” (ibid., p. 233). Constance Jordan points out that Boccaccio’s Joan is virtuous as long as she stays in the private sphere, “monstrous” in the public: “As an event, her motherhood figures her grotesqueness”; see “Boccaccio’s In-Famous Women: Gender and Civic Virtue in the De mulieribus claris,” in Ambiguous Realities: Women in the Middle Ages and Renaissance, ed. Carole Levin and Jeanie Watson (Detroit, Mich.: Wayne State University Press, 1987), p. 33.

[2]
bold women, but it has also been used to discredit the clergy, to make fun of pious hypocrites, and to denounce the papacy and the entire Roman Catholic Church.

The legend of Pope Joan begins with a love affair and ends with an out-of-wedlock birth, but it is not about love or sex, and Joan was not punished for sexual immorality. Boccaccio’s comments and Durrell’s description of the birth scene make it clear that the story is about disorder, and about the filth and chaos that ensue when objects and persons and events are out of place—a woman on the throne of Peter, a child in the belly of a pope, a birth in a public procession. The woman whose learning and virtue carried her to the heights was destroyed by motherhood. Joan was not betrayed by a lover or discovered by an enemy; she was brought down by her own body, which was inherently and catastrophically unfit for ecclesiastical dignity. The literary and artistic images that surround the birth of her child display a range of responses from hysterical laughter to horrified disgust. The notion of a female pope was scandalous; of a pregnant pope, ludicrous; of a pope giving birth, disastrous.

The earliest written sources for the legend of Joan come from the eleventh century, although its elaboration is the work of the Renaissance. The story is set in the ninth century, partly because of obscurities in the historical record but also because that era was consigned to the Dark Ages by Renaissance thinkers. To such critics, who assumed dismal scandals to be the norm in early medieval church and society, it seemed a plausible period for a female pope: the ninth century deserved nothing better.

Whatever the likelihood of a woman pope in any century, the legend of Joan is a fine starting point for an investigation of certain


6. For a thorough and original examination of the legend and its history, see Cesare D’Onofrio, La Papessa Giovanna: Roma e papato tre storia e leggenda (Rome: Romana Societa Editrice, 1979).

7. The tenth century would have been even more suitable. During the so-called “pornocracy” of that era, powerful women—mothers and lovers of popes—controlled political and ecclesiastical affairs in Rome. Contemporary chroniclers
interactions of the history of motherhood with the history of Christianity in the medieval West. In the eleventh and twelfth centuries, when the story was taking shape, devotion to the mother of Christ was blossoming in new artistic, liturgical, and theological expressions. At first sight, the legend of Joan and the cult of Mary have no common characteristics except that each sheds light on the imagination of medieval Christians, who produced images of "mother" and notions of motherhood that ranged from tender and sacred to vulgar and blasphemous. The boundaries of this work are drawn wide enough to include both of these expressions, and many others, within the general topic of the construction of motherhood in medieval Europe.

In the chapters that follow, which are separated chronologically but linked by common themes and questions, medieval motherhood is approached as a social-historical institution with attendant ideologies—systems of ideas that shape consciousness and validate social and religious systems. Medieval motherhood was constructed by persons whose primary ideology was Christianity: Christian stories and moral teaching shaped their imaginative boundaries, their sense of self and world, and their social, legal, and domestic arrangements. This was the case even for those who were illiterate and relatively "unchurched," and to an extent also for those who were not Christians at all: Jewish communities within Europe, Muslims on the borders, and pagans in the remote interior countryside. Jews were profoundly affected by the dominant institutions and prevailing ideologies; Muslims came into commercial and intellectual and belligerent contact with Christians; and country people were gradually driven and persuaded into the fold by warriors, monks, and missionaries. From the vantage point of late twentieth-century pluralism, it is difficult to appreciate all the ways in which a religious system may dominate the public and private experience of persons within its sphere, unless we remember that "Christianity" included a

and later historians have ascribed the troubles of the tenth century to "overmighty" women.

8. I use the complicated term "ideology" without a pejorative implication in the Marxist sense of false consciousness.
near-monopoly of cultural expression, of education, and (at least indirectly) of political power.

In order to investigate medieval motherhood, then, we must look closely at Christianity in western Europe in the Middle Ages, a complex religious and cultural system with a unique set of stories, beliefs, and institutions inherited from the Mediterranean Christianity of the first centuries C.E. The interpretations of stories, formulations of beliefs, and institutions established in the first four hundred years were the building blocks of medieval Christianity, although every aspect was transformed in the new society of medieval Europe. Social historians frequently treat religious ideologies and institutions as epiphenomena, but Christianity was central to the formation of the social, political, intellectual, and psychological structures of the West, and medieval religious imagery and assumptions have not disappeared from our secular and pluralistic society. Modern people understand the legend of Pope Joan differently from those who encountered Boccaccio's version in the fourteenth century, but one need not be a medieval Christian to feel the story's power or appreciate its significance.

All religious systems develop norms for behavior and relationships, including family relationships, with explicit and implicit ideas and prescriptions concerning sexuality and parenthood, mothers and children. Interactions between the history of Christianity and the history of motherhood have been intense and complicated, perhaps in part because Christianity is a religion of embodiment—of Incarnation—whose god entered history as a human being, ate and drank with men and women on earth, was born and died like them. Physicality or embodiment—birth and death—lay at the heart of the faith of those who accepted the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ. And physicality necessarily lies at the heart of constructions of motherhood in any society. Our wishes, fears, and fantasies about embodiment are inextricably linked to our experience of mothers and notions of maternity.

The history of motherhood also requires careful examination of the status and image of women in particular cultures. Although not all women are mothers, all mothers are women: gender ar-
rangements play a crucial role in organizing the institution of motherhood and shaping its ideologies. Images of women in the Scriptures, the roles available to them in churches and communities, and the pronouncements on sex and gender of preachers and theologians had critical impact on the construction of medieval motherhood. The relationship of women to Christianity has never been simple, and it certainly was not simple in medieval times. The messages were loud and numerous, but not consistent. On the one hand, a woman might “be saved through bearing children, if she continues in faith and love and holiness, with modesty” (1 Tim. 2:15); on the other, women were constantly reminded that death came into the world with Eve, “the mother of all living” (Gen. 3:20). Like modern stories, medieval stories are strikingly ambivalent about women’s “nature,” and about motherhood. Twelfth-century tales of the Virgin’s miracles present a mother who is powerful and good, dignified and merciful, while the legend of Pope Joan insists on the gross incompatibility of pregnancy and birth with beauty and holiness.

In any culture, the construction of motherhood carries the mixed messages of the experience of that culture with life and death, sex and gender. Such experience is not universal: the specific psychohistorical circumstances of each generation shape social arrangements and individual consciousness. Motherhood varies not only among families and individuals but according to time, place, race, class, and culture. Like the Christian church or the United States of America, it is a historical phenomenon subject to development and change.

Until quite recently, however, motherhood had no history; it was too thoroughly identified with the private sphere and with the “changeless” biological aspects of the human condition. Women’s lives were organized and their capacities defined by their status as mothers, potential mothers, and non-mothers, but motherhood itself was not perceived as an institution shaped by culture and subject to history. Styles of child rearing and other elements of family life in nonindustrial societies outside the West were more accessible to cultural analysis, thanks to the anthropologists, but even there, historical development was ignored or lost in the ethnographic present. Furthermore, most anthropologists re-
Christian Motherhood

garded fatherhood as a social construction, motherhood as "natural" (or biological). Not even practitioners of the new social history of the twentieth century thought to study motherhood as a specific institution related to the image and status of women and to the political, social, and religious variables of historical change.

Inspired by new questions about women and families, thinkers in the late twentieth century have begun to discover a variety of approaches to the vast, buried history of motherhood and its ramifications in society and culture.9 Searching for the roots and sources of our own family systems and ideologies, historians turned first to the recent past, and studies based on evidence from modern Europe and the United States have begun to appear in substantial numbers. Work in the field of family history has broadened the scope of women's history and vice versa; the interaction is extremely productive. We also enjoy the fruits of the brilliant school of the history of mentalités, whose works reflect appreciation of the historical aspects of such "timeless" phenomena as childhood, sexuality, and even death itself. In the meantime, scholars in the natural sciences and humanities are working with mothering and motherhood as critical principles in many fields; their work nourishes and is supported by historical studies.10

This book extends the historical study of motherhood into medieval Europe and examines its interactions with medieval Christianity. In the remainder of this introductory chapter, I look briefly


at certain aspects of the legacy of early Christianity and at their implications for the construction of medieval motherhood. In some respects—for example, its subversion of the patriarchal household—Christianity was extraordinary among the religious systems of the ancient Near East. Furthermore, the experience of persecution and martyrdom in the early centuries shaped Christian communities in ways that affected the development of distinctive ideologies of motherhood and family life.

Chapter 2 addresses some of the physiological assumptions underlying learned and popular notions about mothers and motherhood in the Middle Ages. Ideas about women’s bodies and reproduction, inherited from Greek science and learned through the practice of midwifery, were essential in the construction of beliefs about what mothers were. The third chapter focuses on the development of “spiritual motherhood” as a concept emerging out of monastic ideologies of the early Middle Ages and a reality in the lives of certain unusual women. Chapter 4 approaches medieval motherhood from a theological perspective: the cult of the Virgin and the Church’s teachings about the mother of Christ are examined in relation to twelfth-century religion and romance. In the fifth chapter the religious and domestic experience of the female saints of the later Middle Ages, many of whom were wives and mothers, are studied against the background of social and religious change in that era. Chapter 6 carries the discussion up to the early modern era and the religious reformations of the sixteenth century, when family and household became centers of energy and organization in religion and society. The book is summarized and concluded in Chapter 7.

This work belongs to the history of ideas more than to social history, but wherever possible I have attempted to consider experience as well as ideology, and to look not only at what was preached about motherhood by “experts” but at the lives of women and children. When most of the written evidence pertains to the ideas of learned men or the experience of a few extraordinary women,
the challenge always is to discover the relevance of teaching and preaching in people’s lives.

A revolution in domestic values and family ideology accompanied Christian missionaries through the Mediterranean world in the first centuries of the Christian era. Jesus and his disciples were Palestinian Jews from a traditional rural society of villages based on patriarchal households linked by ties of kinship. Palestine itself was a small, politically weak nation on the fringes of the Roman Empire, which was engaged at that period in rapid and distant expansion. Among the great variety of sexual, social, and domestic arrangements and ideologies within the empire, the most influential for western Christianity, besides those of the Jews, were those of Rome itself—an urban patriarchy resting, at least in theory, on the unlimited authority of fathers within the family and the state. Some early Christians, following the teaching and example of Jesus, overturned traditional beliefs and practices concerning sex, gender, and authority. Self-selected communities in a hostile or indifferent world, they departed from both Jewish and Roman precedents to form new kinds of “families” whose ethics and attitudes left significant traces in medieval Christianity.

The social arrangements of first-century Jews were shaped by their history as a pastoral people and guided by their Scriptures, especially by the laws of Moses and commentaries on the law by learned teachers. The Hebrew Scriptures affirmed the positive use of sexuality, marriage, and the reproductive powers, assuming their value not only to individuals and families but to the community and the people of God. From the first command to Adam and Eve, “Be fruitful and multiply” (Gen. 1:28), repeated to Noah after the Flood, the Scriptures are filled with injunctions to procreation. Sexual differentiation and reproduction were understood to be intrinsic to Creation, not (as some Christians believed) second-

---

11. For the purpose of this work I treat the Hebrew Bible as if it were one text, which of course it is not. Distinctions of date, genre, authorship, etc., are not essential to this discussion of the influence of the general tone of the Scriptures on Jewish attitudes toward family at the time of Jesus.
best accommodations to the Fall. God was credited with direct responsibility for the conception and birth of children; announcing the birth of Cain, Eve said, "I have gotten a man with the help of the Lord" [Gen. 4:1].

For the Jews, children were a blessing and barrenness a divine curse or punishment. The birth of Isaac to a woman who was ninety years old required God's intervention in God's own process, for "it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women" [Gen. 18:11]. The cycle of ovulation and menstruation, with the recurrent possibility of conception, was limited to women of childbearing age, and that cycle, like the cycles of the tides and the seasons, was understood to be expressly arranged for God's people. The reproductive miracle of Sarah was so basic and so crucial that it was used to effect God's choice of Israel. (Later, the birth of Isaac became a model for other miraculous births to aged or barren parents. In medieval hagiography an infant so conceived was a divine agent, and miraculous conception and birth were marks of a saint.) God's favor was also expressed through the number and sex of one's offspring and posterity. Abraham was given not only a son in his old age but the promise of innumerable descendants: "'Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them.' Then he said to him, 'So shall your descendants be'" [Gen. 15:5].

The sacred writings of the Jews reflect the material value of children in a society in which sons and daughters, especially sons, were an important form of wealth. Prosperity was measured by the increase of family and servants and flocks and herds; sterility, sickness, and death among people or animals brought material and emotional disaster and showed divine displeasure. The physical well-being of a family and the happiness of its members depended on the practical skills and moral characteristics of the parents. A good wife was, above everything, the careful and energetic mistress of a household—and neither her household nor her work was set apart in a "private" sphere. Before the Industrial Revolution, production and reproduction were not separated; both men and women worked at home. The good wife of Proverbs bought a field, planted a vineyard, and sold her goods at the market. The role of the biblical housewife was much larger than that of
her modern sisters. When her children “rise up and call her blessed” (Prov. 31:28), it is not for sentimental reasons but because she provides for everyone under her roof. Typical responses to conception and birth and healthy children included the kind of satisfaction expressed by a farmer with a fine crop as well as the devout gratitude of a believer who receives a token of divine favor.

The Hebrew Scriptures emphasize the social dimensions of holiness, describing virtue and morality in terms of their contribution to the welfare of the Jewish people. Appropriate expressions of sexuality served the community, and the value and importance of marital sex was recognized beyond its function in procreation. Sexual expression was acceptable within marriage even when women were pregnant or nursing, while sexual activity outside of marriage was discouraged even for men, with strict sanctions against male homosexuality.¹² Young women married shortly after puberty, and there was no interest in virginity as a permanent status for adults. Ascetic, celibate groups did exist within Judaism during the period preceding the life of Jesus, but under ordinary circumstances it was the religious obligation of every man to marry and raise a family in a devout and responsible manner. The only satisfactory social role for a woman was that of wife-mother-housewife; a childless woman was regarded as unhappy and unfortunate.

The “Jesus movement”¹³ was soon carried out of its traditional Jewish context into the diverse, heterogeneous Greco-Roman cities around the Mediterranean, where its missionaries encountered people with all kinds of religious affiliations, domestic customs, and sexual practices and ideologies. In the development of Christian ideas and practices concerning families, the most significant converts were the Romans themselves. Roman men tended to assume, as instructed by their Greek mentors, that

¹² Vern. L. Bullough suggests that such sanctions may have grown more strict during the Hellenistic period, when Jews reacted against the customs of Gentiles; see his Sexual Variance in Society and History (New York: Wiley, 1976), pp. 85–86.

women were inferior to men, vulnerable to endless infirmities connected with childbearing, and temperamentally incapable of the \textit{gravitas} required by Roman ideals of character. There was a gap between the mythology and the realities of life under the empire, however, and Roman women were not in fact confined to the segregated and submissive status of their Athenian counterparts. During the early Christian period upper-class Roman women achieved a substantial degree of autonomy and access to property and sociability, at least in relation to other women of classical antiquity. Some women and men chose to marry late or not at all and to prevent or postpone childbearing; abortion was available, along with a variety of contraceptive devices and prescriptions.\footnote{See John T. Noonan, Jr., \textit{Contraception: A History of Its Treatment by the Catholic Theologians and Canonists} (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1966), chap. 1.}

In the first century C.E., faced with a declining population inadequate to the military and administrative requirements of the empire, Augustus enacted legislation designed to reward marriage and fertility. Under the new laws autonomy was one reward of motherhood: free women with three children and freedwomen with four were released from the tutelage of male relatives and guardians. In Roman as in Jewish society, no class of persons was expected to remain celibate indefinitely, and all men and women were encouraged to marry and raise children to serve the community.\footnote{The Vestal Virgins were few in number (only six at one time), and each served for a term of thirty years, after which she was free to marry.}

In relation to matrimony and motherhood, as in other matters, the Romans were caught between the realities of imperial society and a shared, idealized "memory" of the Golden Age of the Roman Republic. The image of the republican family—noble husbands and faithful wives, careful parents and obedient children—survived into the late empire. For matrons, the mythical model (from the second century B.C.E.) was Cornelia, daughter of the great general Scipio Africanus and mother of the Gracchi. Cornelia was widowed with twelve children, of whom three survived to adulthood, and she refused to remarry even when Ptolemy asked her to be his queen. Plutarch wrote that Cornelia raised her two
Christian Motherhood

sons “with such scrupulous care that, although confessedly no other Romans were so well-endowed by nature, they were thought to owe their virtues more to education than to nature.”16 She was admired for her continued chastity, her discretion, and her willingness to accept her sons’ deaths in the service of the state. This aristocratic woman, venerated by Plutarch and by her contemporaries for her lineage as well as her behavior, was a much more prominent person than the woman of Proverbs. Nonetheless, both of these exemplary figures received extravagant praise for the “feminine” virtues of devotion to family and household—virtues that also served the community. Their stories reveal the interlocking systems of patriarchal society, the private/public service of women to the family and the state.

Within the far-flung empire of the first centuries of the Christian era were people and groups whose sexual and familial codes and practices were very different from those of the Jews and also from those represented by the myths and realities of imperial Rome. Long before the arrival of the Christian missions, Greek philosophical schools included powerful strains of sexual asceticism and other-worldliness. Eventually, through Neoplatonism, these became major elements in patristic Christianity (see Chapter 3). Philosophers and their disciples, perceiving irreconcilable conflict or incompatibility between soul and body or between philosophy and “family” (defined to include property, obligations to kin, and other attachments), tended to reject sexual activity and domestic life in favor of contemplation and the possibility of union with the divine.

Even among such moderate groups as the Stoics, whose influence on Christianity was substantial over time, there was an attitude of cautious reserve toward human affections, both sexual and parental. Stoics recognized the necessity of sexual expression for procreation but disapproved of passion; a primary virtue was apatheia—an exemplary indifference to loss and pain achieved through the surrender of harmful possessiveness. Plutarch praised Cornelia, the model of Roman maternity, who was “most admira-

ble when she spoke of her sons without grief or tears, and narrated their achievements and their fate to all enquirers as if she were speaking of men of the early days of Rome.” But Plutarch also reveals that not everyone was sufficiently influenced by Stoic ideals to be impressed by Cornelia’s reserve. He said it made some people “think that old age or the greatness of her sorrows had impaired her mind and made her insensible to her misfortunes.”17

The philosophical schools constituted a significant presence among learned people in the cities but did not define normative family structure or attitudes toward sex, gender, and parenthood. Notwithstanding the great variety of family feeling and ideology and expression, the distinct and dominant pattern in the Mediterranean world was that of the patriarchal family. Most adults married, and except in highly unusual circumstances, motherhood was the primary social and religious duty of women.

Unlike Jewish kings, rabbis, and householders and responsible Roman citizens, Jesus was not married, and he called his disciples—women as well as men—away from their families. His following was based not on blood but on discipleship, and he proclaimed the constituency of his “family” in a saying reported in all three synoptic Gospels:

And his mother and his brothers came; and standing outside they sent to him and called him. And a crowd was sitting about him; and they said to him, “Your mother and your brothers are outside, asking for you.” And he replied, “Who are my mother and my brothers?” And looking around on those who sat about him, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother, and sister, and mother.” (Mark 3:31–35).

The absence of any mention of a father is significant. In the new family there was one Father in heaven, but no one on earth with the dominion (power over others) of traditional patriarchs.18 The passage has been discussed at length by scholars and by apologists who resist or insist upon a perceived rejection of the Virgin Mary.

18. See the discussion in Schüssler Fiorenza, In Memory of Her, pp. 146–147.
CHRISTIAN MOTHERHOOD

It seems clear, however, that this is a comment on the membership of the new family and not on the biological family of Jesus, except that he used his own relatives to make the point that the criteria for "family" were new in the New Age. Again, when a woman said to Jesus, "Blessed is the womb that bore you, and the breasts that you sucked," he answered, "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it!" (Luke 11:27–28). Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza interprets this text to mean that "faithful discipleship, not biological motherhood, is the eschatological calling of women."¹⁹ I believe that her interpretation is correct, and I understand this reversal to be a significant contribution to the history of motherhood.

In its first centuries, the Jesus movement appealed strongly to the dispossessed—to the poor, to slaves, to social outcasts. It appealed to women among these and other groups, doubtless in part because of their subordination in traditional patriarchal societies, but also because Jesus accepted women as companions and disciples. He ate and drank with women, talked and listened to them, and even touched and healed a woman who was ritually unclean, having "had a flow of blood for twelve years" (Mark 5:25). According to the Gospels, Jesus encouraged women to step outside of their assigned roles. He refused to insist that Mary leave his teaching in order to join her sister in the kitchen, where Martha, like the good wife of Proverbs, was "distracted with much serving" and "anxious and troubled about many things" (Luke 10:40–41).²⁰ Because the roles of housewife and mother were identified, the opportunity for women to choose a "good portion" that was not housewifery suggested that under certain circumstances, motherhood also might be a lesser good.

Members of the Jesus movement left home, abandoned physical security and conventional sources of emotional security, and were adopted into a new family with no stable home in this world. After Pentecost the missionaries carried their new relationships around the Roman world. In confident expectation of the immi-

¹⁹. Ibid., p. 16.
²⁰. According to Schüssler Fiorenza (ibid., p. 330), the intention was "to portray the true disciple Mary of Bethany as counterpart to the unfaithful disciple Judas Iscariot."
nent arrival of the Kingdom but in existing circumstances of isolation and danger, they depended on the warmth and acceptance of brothers and sisters in the faith. Like other adherents of cults and new religions, they willingly left behind the disappointments and limitations of biological families and conventional relationships. Among the attributes of *communitas*, as defined and applied by Victor Turner, is the “suspension of kinship rights and obligations [all are siblings or comrades of one another regardless of previous secular ties].” This description suits some early Christians very well, as does Turner’s use of the term “liminality,” which refers to a marginal condition of passage from one state to another. Liminality is usually associated with sexual continence—essential, according to Turner, when kinship ties are suspended and there is a high degree of egalitarianism in gender relations.21

Although most of the first disciples were married, the radical nature of the eschatological “family” produced an ethic of continence among Christian converts. It may have been practiced most extensively among women, but it is best known from the writings of St. Paul, who said, “To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is well for them to remain single as I do” (1 Cor. 7:8). In his own time Paul’s example was as important as his words, which were intended to help Christians live and work effectively in the short time remaining. Marriage was no sin, Paul believed, “yet those who marry will have worldly troubles, and I would spare you that . . . the appointed time has grown very short” (1 Cor. 7:28–29). Recently it has been suggested that the “widows” of New Testament texts were groups of celibate women, some of whom were never married. Their calling was to prayer, chastity, and ministry, and they received support from the community.22 The Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles include stories celebrating the miraculous adventures of charismatic apostles, including the heroic virgin Thecla.23 In some of these Acts, biological parenthood

Christian Motherhood

is either ignored or discussed in terms unlike anything in the
Hebrew Bible, in Roman biography, or in the Gospels. In one
extreme example, the author counters the argument that procre­
ation justifies sexual intercourse:

But if you get many children, then for their sakes you become robbers
and avaricious. . . . For the majority of children become unprofitable,
possessed by demons . . . they become either lunatic or half-withered
[consumptive] or crippled or deaf or dumb or paralytic or stupid.
Even if they are healthy, again will they be unserviceable, performing
useless and abominable deeds; for they are caught either in adultery
or murder or in theft or in unchastity, and by all these you will be
afflicted.24

With the triumph of the “orthodox” canon, these writings were
consigned to the marginal status of “heterodox” texts. As we shall
see, however, some of their themes, including the pain and futility
of biological parenthood, lived on in the history of Christianity.
The requirements of discipleship, including vulnerability to
persecution and the surrender of family ties, caused consternation
among outsiders, and particularly among the relatives of converts.
Some Christians were reputed to be unfilial troublemakers. To
the disciple who asked, “Lord, let me first go and bury my father,”
Jesus said, “Follow me, and leave the dead to bury their own dead”
(Matt. 8:21–22). Such an exclusive commitment, characteristic of
radical sects, rarely survives when a movement grows and begins
to appeal to established social groups. After a time, not all of those
who were attracted to aspects of the Christian movement were
able or willing to follow homeless, charismatic preachers into
social oblivion. From very early days there were wide differences
of opinion within the movement about the need for “structure”
and the varieties of leadership.25 At the beginning of the second
century, Ignatius of Antioch instructed Christians to “regard the

(Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1945), p. 331, which described the
different roles of “prophets and teachers” and “bishops and deacons,” and in­
structed believers to treat both groups with respect.

[17]
bishops soon became teachers, rulers, and "fathers"; Ignatius told the Magnesians, whose bishop was a young man, "to render him all respect according to the power of God the Father." The patriarchal authority of men was easily conflated with the authority of God and restored to the "households" of the new churches.

With the emergence of ecclesiastical hierarchy in Christian communities came new writings, of unknown authorship but ascribed to Paul in order to borrow his prestige. In the second century, the letters to the Colossians and Ephesians and the Pastoral Epistles were enlisted in the struggle against Christian radicalism. These texts are marked by concern for the reputation of Christians in the world, by attention to the structures and leadership of the developing churches, and by a determined campaign against the threat of egalitarianism in gender and class relations. Composed late in the first and early in the second century, these writings ignored the break with the biological family proclaimed in some sayings of Jesus and promoted by certain other Christian texts and practices. They incorporated ancient household codes reflecting patriarchal values shared by Jews and Gentiles, assuming that household and state were established on the "natural" (biological) inferiority of women and identifying the relationship of husband and wife with that of parent and child, or master and slave. In the first letter to Timothy—despite Jesus' attitude toward Mary of Bethany—women are directed toward traditional roles. The order of widows was restricted to women at least sixty years old who had been married to one husband, raised children, and served the community. Groups of celibate women of various ages were discouraged from living together; young women were urged to "marry, bear children, rule their households, and give the enemy no occasion to revile us" (1 Tim. 5:14). By the beginning of the second century, powerful voices within the Christian move-

29. See the discussion of the household codes in Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, pp. 251–270.
ment were working to restore women to the patriarchal household and the patriarchal household to the center of Christian society.

The Pastoral Epistles won places in the scriptural canon while more radical writings were excluded, but only after an extended period of conflict and struggle, much of which has been hidden from Christian historiography. The eschatological vision of the new family did not capture the institutions and ideologies of Christianity, but neither did it completely disappear: it is preserved in the Gospels, in certain Pauline passages, and in a variety of other writings. Some of these, such as the Apocryphal Acts, have been dismissed as heterodox or trivial, but others, such as the Acts of the Martyrs, have always held a central place in doctrine and devotion. During the long period of persecution preceding the establishment of Christianity in the fourth century, martyrdom and persecution undercut the values of the dominant culture, breaking traditional bonds and forging new ones. Faced with violent, immediate death, the martyrs recreated the family of discipleship modeled by the men and women who followed Jesus to his crucifixion. In many respects they shared the voice and vision of the disciples as well as their experience of communitas. Their mutual love and support withstood terror, and even death itself, as attested in the Acts that preserved their memory and immortalized their experience.

Most of the Acts of the Martyrs were written in the third century, at the same time that the Pastoral Epistles were accepted into the canon. These Acts present very different models of family and of gender relations; they demonstrate the martyrs’ renunciation of traditional concerns and reversal of ordinary priorities. Perpetua, a young North African matron waiting for death in the arena, was plagued by her father’s arguments and tormented by his tears. He kept begging her to recant, saying: “Have pity on my grey head—have pity on me your father. . . . Think of your brothers, think of your mother and your aunt, think of your child, who will not be able to live once you are gone.”

Perpetua grieved for her father—“I felt sorry for his pathetic old

30. Ibid., pp. 245–250.
age”—but neither pity nor reverence for the *paterfamilias* tempted her to recant. She was much more troubled about her infant son, and her father played on her fears by threatening the child’s welfare and depriving her of his presence. God intervened to frustrate the father’s intentions and relieve the young mother of pain, responsibility, and anxiety:

But my baby had got used to being nursed at the breast and to staying with me in prison. So I sent the deacon Pomponius straight away to my father to ask for the baby. But father refused to give him over. But as God willed, the baby had no further desire for the breast, nor did I suffer any inflammation; and so I was relieved of any anxiety for my child and of any discomfort in my breasts.32

The memory of Perpetua as a heroic representative of Christian motherhood was not lost on later Christians. St. Augustine, preaching on her passion in the fifth century, emphasized that she was not only a woman but “a mother likewise, that unto the frailty of that sex might be added a more importunate love.”33 With divine favor clearly expressed in the down-to-earth business of weaning an infant, no questions were raised about motherhood as an obstacle to religious leadership, and no Christian commentator expressed the view that Perpetua should have stayed at home with her child. Her “good portion” was not in the household; maternal responsibility and “importunate love” were superseded by the new birth into Christ.

The story of Felicitas, Perpetua’s companion and serving maid, also exhibits the place of motherhood in the *communitas* of martyrs. Felicitas was eight months pregnant and fearful that she would be left behind when the others were given to the beasts, for Roman law prohibited the execution of pregnant women. She did not want to die alone or with ordinary criminals, and the other Christians were worried also;

32. Ibid., 6, p. 115.
for they were afraid that they would have to leave behind so fine a companion to travel alone on the same road to hope. And so, two days before the contest, they poured forth a prayer to the Lord in one torrent of common grief. And immediately after their prayer the birth pains came upon her. She suffered a good deal in her labor, because of the natural difficulty of an eight months’ delivery.\textsuperscript{34}

God intervened again, bringing premature labor and delivery; Felicitas gave birth to a healthy infant, “and one of the sisters brought her up as her own daughter.” The delivery enhanced Felicitas’s glory, for she was “glad that she had safely given birth so that now she could fight the beasts, going from one blood bath to another, from the midwife to the gladiator, ready to wash after childbirth in a second baptism.”\textsuperscript{35}

The recent motherhood of both women was obvious when they were stripped in the arena: “Even the crowd was horrified when they saw that one was a delicate young girl and the other was a woman fresh from childbirth with the milk still dripping from her breasts.”\textsuperscript{36} The youth, sex, and maternity of Perpetua and Felicitas won them sympathy from the hostile crowd, the special love of their companions, and divine assistance in the physical processes of birth and lactation. They were neither protected from horrible deaths nor disqualified for heroism or holiness. Childbirth was recognized as a tough physical challenge, comparable to the contest in the arena; motherhood made the struggle more difficult and the sacrifice more valuable. Childbirth in prison, and the physical evidence of recent labor and delivery, were occasions of admiration and respect—not, as in the story of Pope Joan, of caricature and cruelty.

For these early Christians, then, motherhood was not especially relevant to holiness. Although it did not necessarily bring women closer to God, it did not block their access to the sacred. Responding to the faith of the woman with the flow of blood, Jesus healed

\textsuperscript{34} “Martyrdom of Saints Perpetua and Felicitas,” 15, p. 123. An eighth-month delivery was believed to be especially dangerous and difficult—according to the Hippocratic tradition, more dangerous than a seventh-month delivery.

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., p. 125; 18, p. 127.

\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., 20, p. 129.
her of her illness, and God facilitated the martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas despite their physiological condition. The biological demands of motherhood, accepted in the ancient world as marks and determinants of female incapacity, were not allowed to stand in the way of the martyrs' witness. Motherhood was not in itself redemptive, but neither did it preclude participation in the most sacred vocation. Under extraordinary circumstances a woman might belong to an eschatological family whose requirements preempted those of the biological family. The institutions and ideologies of Christian motherhood had deep roots in Jewish and Roman and other ancient sources, but medieval Europeans inherited a construction more complex than any of its multiple components.