The Oldest Vocation
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Published by Cornell University Press

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The Oldest Vocation: Christian Motherhood in the Medieval West.

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CHAPTER SIX

Motherhood Reformed:
The Parson’s Wife
and Her Children

In Utopia, wrote Thomas More; “each woman nurses her own offspring unless prevented by either death or disease. When that happens . . . women who can do the service offer themselves with the greatest readiness since everybody praises this kind of pity and since the child who is thus fostered looks on his nurse as his natural mother.”¹ This happy, healthy situation reflected the order, harmony, and prosperity of a commonwealth composed of “households, [which] as a rule are made up of those related by blood. . . . Wives wait on their husbands, children on their parents, and generally the younger on their elders.”² In Utopia, as in More’s England, morality and social order were understood to rest upon the conjugal family—on the father’s authority, the mother’s physical and spiritual service, and the production and socialization of new citizens. Even in the religious battleground of the sixteenth century, the loyal Catholic Thomas More agreed on certain subjects with Martin Luther: on maternal breastfeeding, for example, and on the significance of family and household as basic political, economic, and religious communities. Humanists such as More and his friend Erasmus, who remained in the old Church, partici-

². Ibid., pp. 135, 137.
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pated with Protestant reformers in the construction and adaptation of ideologies of Christian motherhood for the transformed circumstances of early modern Europe.

Like their Italian predecessors, northern humanists tended to emphasize the virtues and activities of this world over contemplation of the next. And by 1500, "this world" was undergoing transformation in almost every aspect. Histories of Christianity focus on theological and ecclesiastical developments, but even while religious reformers were breaking ancient doctrines and institutions apart and creating new ones, navigators and adventurers were redrawing the map of the world. Religious reform and geographical expansion stimulated and accompanied transformations in politics and society, economic and intellectual life. The world within the household was altered as profoundly as the world outside, with long-lasting repercussions for marriage and parenthood, for the experience of family life, and the place of the household in church and society. The relationship of virtue and holiness to domesticity was turned around: the ideal mother of the sixteenth century was radically different from her medieval predecessor.

From the perspective of the late twentieth century, we can appreciate not only the creativity of the sixteenth century but the impact and duration of its revaluation and reconstruction of home and family. Compared with the exotic terrain of the Middle Ages, the sixteenth century looks remarkably familiar, in part because many of its attitudes and assumptions linger in the background of our own domestic values and arrangements. To study in detail the institution of Christian motherhood in the early modern era would require another volume, but an overview, highlighting certain significant changes, completes the picture of what went before and points up the drastic nature of the transformation. In this chapter I illustrate selected aspects of the domestic revolution of the sixteenth century, both to conclude my study of medieval Christian motherhood and to emphasize the staying-power of developments in family history at the dawn of the modern era.

The shock of recognition that signals the turn to modernity arises in historiography as well as history. Thanks to the invention of printing, the proliferation of books and other materials, and the
spread of literacy, the sixteenth century offers a rich and varied archive for the history of the family. Compared with medievalists, historians of early modern Europe can see into more places, find records of more individuals and groups, and discover more direct evidence of domestic affections and allegiances. Especially in the seventeenth century, many men and women developed a new self-consciousness about their own lives, kept diaries, wrote autobiographies and voluminous personal letters, and commissioned portraits of themselves and their children. The sources are still skewed by class and gender but not as markedly as medieval materials. The growing and increasingly literate middle class included women as well as men and many kinds and conditions of persons with varied interests and perspectives. Saints’ lives, which are always relevant to the history of Christian ideologies, remain useful, but early modern historians are not restricted to works of hagiography or devotion, or to the writings of celibate men.

Many sixteenth-century texts not only assume and argue for the centrality of marriage and parenthood in human experience but directly address questions that concern historians of the family—questions about the relationship of husbands and wives, about how children ought to be raised, about good and bad mothers. Because the authors of these texts shared our interest in families, we depend less on inference and on arguments from silence than is necessary in the interpretation of medieval materials. The varied documents of the new era, essential for the history of the family in the modern West, shed light backward as well as forward, contributing significant insights into the stories and symbols of Christian motherhood in the Middle Ages.

The reconstruction of family life and of Christian motherhood in early modern Europe occurred within a revolution in church and society produced by sweeping economic and political change. Geographically, the world known to Europeans expanded rapidly and extensively through the discovery, exploration, and exploitation of distant lands and oceans. Between the last quarter of the fifteenth century and the middle of the seventeenth, Europeans traveled around Africa to India, circumnavigated the globe, and planted settlements in the islands and two continents of the West-
ERN HEMISPHERE. THE RELIGIOUS REFORMATIONS, WHICH CAN BE REPRESENTED ON THE ONE HAND AS CULMINATIONS OF TRENDS AND TENDENCIES WITHIN MEDIEVAL CHRISTIANITY, CAN BE UNDERSTOOD ALSO AS ASPECTS OF THE BROADER TURN TOWARD MODERNITY.


⁴ JOAN KELLY GADOW POINTED TO THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN DOMESTIC AND ECONOMIC CHANGE IN EARLY MODERN EUROPE IN HER 1980 ESSAY "FAMILY AND SOCIETY," IN WOMEN, HISTORY, AND THEORY (CHICAGO: UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS, 1984), ESP. PP.
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tion, and labor organization were born in response to economic pressures, stimulating the transition from late feudalism to early capitalism.

The disappearance of feudal structures in early modern Europe was associated with the decline of the old baronial class, whose wealth and power were based on land, and with the rise of national monarchies, notably those of England, France, and Spain. Kings, traditionally first among equals, burst out of feudal restraints in the sixteenth century. Medieval kings had learned to form alliances with urban communes and oligarchies; sixteenth-century rulers continued that practice with great effectiveness, increasing their own wealth and power and the cities' independence at the expense of feudal magnates. More loudly and explicitly than ever before, rulers and political theorists presented royal authority in terms of patriarchy: identifying themselves with the fathers of families, kings claimed the loyalty and obedience owed to domestic rulers. The early modern state, and the kings who represented and personified it, made powerful claims for the affection and service and economic resources of their subjects. The image of the king as husband and father of the nation and of the father as monarch in the home strengthened both sides of the equation: patriarchal rule in state and household was the fundamental political movement of the sixteenth century. James I of England made this plain when he declared: "I am the Husband, and all the whole Isle is my lawfull Wife."5


The establishment of patriarchy in state, economy, and household was one element of a long, gradual transition from the kin-based society of early medieval Europe to a society based primarily on the conjugal family: that is, a married pair and the people intimately related to them by blood and service. Over time, “family” came to refer less significantly to kin and lineage, more significantly to a husband and wife, their children, and the other persons living in their household under their authority.6 Linda Nicholson, a political philosopher, has analyzed the emergence of the early modern family in relation to political, legal, and economic developments: “The family and the state as we now comprehend them were being created out of the older institution of kinship. Thus kinship systems, which at one time had been the major mechanism for regulating food production and distribution, sexuality, crime and punishment, etc., were replaced by the twin and separate institutions of the family and the state.”7

Analogous developments can be observed in religion. Among historians of Christianity, John Bossy has been most attentive to the transition from the kin-based religious practices and church organization of medieval Christianity to the parish-and-household-oriented practices and structures of early modern times.8 The medieval Church offered ecclesiastical support and ritual

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6. In “Ghosts, Kin, and Progeny: Some Features of Family Life in Early Modern France,” Daedalus 106 (1977), 87–114, Natalie Zemon Davis wrote of “the interests of the immediate family... sharply demarcated from others’ interests, especially from those of the wider kinship group” (p. 100) and of the development of strategies for the future of the family. See also Herlihy, Medieval Households, chap. 4.


recognition to human and divine kinship; in both Protestant and Catholic communities after the reformation, religious activities were organized primarily around parishes based on conjugal households. Nicholson and Bossy use different language and select different phenomena to describe and illustrate profound changes in the ways that people lived together, formed and maintained primary attachments and allegiances, and socialized their children. “Religion” and “society” were not separable in early modern Europe; in religious and social aspects alike, systems based on traditional kinship and collectivities gave way to systems based on aggregations of households, and on the married men who ruled and represented them.

The reformation were religious phenomena, but they cannot be understood in terms of theology alone; they supported, complemented, and promoted the other social and political transformations of the sixteenth century. Protestant and Catholic reformers, educated in the languages and literature of biblical and classical learning, shared the humanists’ emphasis on the importance of the family for good order and the socialization of the young. The magisterial reformers endorsed the claims and supported the extended authority of kings and princes and of all civil governments. The reality of a fractured church, and the acceptance by midcentury of the principle that the religious affiliation of a people ought to be determined by that of their prince, contributed to the patriarchal authority of rulers, even women rulers. It seemed obvious on the national as well as the domestic scale that the faith of “family members” must be shared and conform to that of the master.9

Between the fifteenth and the seventeenth centuries, on every level of society and in several aspects (political, economic, religious), there was increasing pressure to ensure that every person

9. This conviction made possible arguments for divorce in cases of conscience (as among some Anabaptists) and eventually also in cases of extreme incompatibility. As domestic harmony became more crucial, domestic conflict began to be seen as intolerable. See Martin Bucer in *De regno Christi: Opera Latina XV*, ed. François Wendel (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1955), xxii–xlv, pp. 165–231. Milton translated these chapters into English and used Bucer’s authority to support his own arguments on divorce; see “The Judgment of Martin Bucer Touching Divorce,” in *Complete Prose Works of John Milton*, vol. 2 (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1959), pp. 441–479.
belong to a family headed by a father—the “household” of Utopia. The alliances of kinship, which at least in the more prosperous classes had offered a degree of support and certain opportunities for autonomy to women outside the patriarchal household, gave way to the twin edifices of family and state. The closing of convents deprived Protestant women of their only institutional alternative to marriage, while among Roman Catholics after the Council of Trent, women’s religious orders came ever more strictly under the “fatherly” authority of bishops. In the course of the century, women’s participation in religious, social, and economic activity was increasingly confined to the household, under the rule of its master. Women’s reproductive labor served God and men; developing ideologies of motherhood idealized and enforced such service. Outside the family, women began to be perceived as dangerous—threats to society, religion, and good order. The domestic work of wives and mothers was glorified at the expense of all other female participation in church and society.

The earliest articulations of early modern ideologies of marriage, family, and Christian motherhood came from humanists—from the Italians first, and later from their northern colleagues. Their reverence for education, attention to civic virtue, and preference for worldly activity over monastic renunciation helped to promote a new appreciation of marriage and parenthood. The influential Erasmus of Rotterdam (d. 1536) loved to make fun of lazy, vicious monks and nuns; he urged young people, especially young women, to marry and attend to husbands, households, and children. Celibate himself, Erasmus praised the excellence of marriage, warned of the physical and moral dangers of religious life, and lectured parents on their responsibilities.

In a colloquy entitled “The New Mother,” Erasmus spoke through the pedantic “Eutrapelus,” who calls on “Fabulla,” supposedly to congratulate her on the recent birth of her child; he seizes the opportunity to speak at length on psychology, physiology, virtue, and child development. Like many of Erasmus’s female protagonists, Fabulla is intelligent and outspoken. When Eutrapelus asks, sarcastically, if she believes that God has “so much leisure that he even attends women in labor,” she answers:

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“What could he better do, Eutrapelus, than preserve by propagation what he created?” She makes a case for the strength and courage of women compared with soldiers, some of whom manage to avoid actual combat, while “we must engage death at close quarters.”

Fabulla outthinks and outtalks her guest until the moment when he discovers that her baby has a wet nurse; then he takes over the conversation and begins to win all the arguments—declaring, insisting, threatening. A woman who will not nurse is only half a mother, he says: “When you see on your breasts those two little swollen fountains, so to speak, flowing with milk of their own accord, believe that Nature is reminding you of your duty.” Eutrapelus (and Erasmus) believe that wet-nursing is morally and physically unnatural, and dangerous besides: “I’m convinced that children’s characters are injured by the nature of the milk, just as in fruits or plants the moisture of the soil changes the quality of what it nourishes.”

Eutrapelus appeals to maternal tenderness: “Isn’t it a kind of exposure to hand over the tender infant, still red from its mother, drawing breath from its mother, crying for its mother’s care—a sound said to move even wild beasts—to a woman who perhaps has neither good health nor good morals?” Assured that the nurse is healthy and well-behaved, he returns to the argument from natural history, pointing out that “there’s no class of living creatures that does not nurse its own young,” and asking: “Do you suppose it makes no difference whether a delicate infant drinks in congenial and familiar nourishment and is cherished by the now familiar warmth or is forced to get used to somebody else’s?”

Eutrapelus obviously shares the ancient assumption about the identity of blood and milk, but unlike earlier Christian teachers (the Desert Fathers, for example), he believes that the health and

10. Desiderius Erasmus, The Colloquies of Erasmus, ed. and trans. Craig R. Thompson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), pp. 269, 271. Eutrapelus refers to political and economic turmoil—the peasants’ revolt, threatened bankruptcy, the Turks, factions in the Church: “Antichrist is awaited; the whole earth is pregnant with I know not what calamity.” Fabulla responds, quietly, that all of this may be insignificant to God.

11. Ibid., pp. 282, 283.

12. Ibid., p. 273.
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strength of the body determine that of the mind and spirit. Thus it is essential that "the youthful body receive proper care from the minute it's born."¹³

Disruption in the bonding of mother and child may be disastrous, Eutrapelus warns: "Your son may love you less, his natural affection being divided, as it were, between two mothers; and your devotion to him will cool in turn. The result will be that when he's older, he'll be the less willing to obey your commands and you'll care less for him—you'll see the nurse in the way he behaves." Such an estrangement might interfere with the first, vital stages of education: "If, therefore, none of the warmth of natural devotion is lost, you'll instill principles of good conduct into him more easily. The mother is of no small importance in this respect, both because the material she molds is most plastic and because it is responsive to every suggestion."¹⁴

The idealized Fabulla responds immediately to this basic humanist educational philosophy; her highest aspiration is to raise a virtuous child, and she requires only guidance and instruction to become a perfect mother and teacher. Believing that the "nature" of a human being is formed for good or bad during infancy and early childhood, Erasmus was intent upon persuading women to devote themselves to their crucial task. A mother's work, the mission of her life, is accomplished during her child's earliest years. If the child is a boy, her time is short: "This time too will come some day; if God will, when you must send the boy out from home to learn his letters—and harder lessons, which are the father's responsibility rather than the mother's. Now his tender age should be cherished."¹⁵

Eutrapelus appeals to Fabulla's intelligence and good will, and to something else—her "natural" maternal sympathies, or what might be called "maternal instinct." Much more than breast-feeding is involved. Even if the nurse is a paragon, only a mother can tolerate and love an infant through "the filth, the sitting up late, the bawling, the illnesses, the never sufficiently attentive

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¹³. Ibid., p. 278.
¹⁴. Ibid., p. 283.
¹⁵. Ibid., p. 273.
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Here the ex-monk Erasmus nearly echoed the monastic tradition he despised, but he used the ancient topos of the horrors of physical motherhood to convey a message entirely different from (for example) that of Jerome. Motherhood defines and transforms Fabulla; she is not offered an alternative to its hardships. No one else can care for her baby, who thrives only if she devotes herself to him. The child's physical and moral welfare, and his potential intellectual development, are paramount. Physical motherhood, glorified as essential in the civic and Christian formation of the child, is the natural vocation of every woman—
even, or especially, of educated and virtuous women.

The first generation of Protestant reformers, building on the teachings of the humanists as well as on the theological rejection of monastic vows, had a consuming interest in matters of marriage and family. Erasmus and Luther differed about the freedom of the will, but both were convinced of the goodness of marriage, the importance of careful child raising, and the value of mothers' milk. The reformers had an excellent private reason as well as a theological rationale for their passion for family: their movement demanded personal commitment. Raised in a world that required celibacy of its religious elite, they became a clergy of husbands and fathers. Their domestic lives were self-conscious representations of a revolutionary appreciation of God's plan for human society. They understood marriage, and especially parenthood, as essential vocations, and their lives as well as their teachings produced new chapters in the history of the family.

The most articulate and influential of the first generation was Martin Luther: monk become family man, prototype of the new Protestant parson. His parsonage, shared with Katherine von Bora and their six children, became a model of the Christian home—watched, criticized, emulated, and remembered. Katie herself, once a nun, became a minister's wife and a mother, moving in one lifetime from one version to the next of the holiest life available to a Christian woman. Luther, who defied his own father when he became a monk and later defied his other "father," the pope,
reified paternity and patriarchy as governing principles of the Protestant reform.17

Luther’s attitude toward marriage and family developed in conjunction with his emerging theology. As early as 1519 he preached on marriage, which he called a divine institution. At that time he did not move far from his scholastic predecessors in defining woman’s nature and calling—she was “created to be a companionable helpmeet to the man in everything, particularly to bear children”—but he displayed much more enthusiasm for the work of parents. Married people, he said: “can do no better work and do nothing more valuable either for God, for Christendom, for all the world, for themselves, and for their children than to bring up their children well . . . bringing up their children properly is their shortest road to Heaven.” This privilege and responsibility had its bitter side, for “by the same token, hell is no more easily earned than with respect to one’s own children . . . . There is no greater tragedy in Christendom than spoiling children.”18 To the end of his life, Luther harped on the two themes of the divine institution and goodness of marriage and the critical importance of parenthood. His ideas grew more complex as the reformers established and argued positions in relation to allies and enemies, and in some respects he grew more understanding and accepting as he lived with Katie and raised children, but he never deviated from his central themes.

Luther’s early attitudes on sex and family were shaped by his interpretation of Scripture, by pastoral experience, and by a developing distrust of works-righteousness. When he wrote his three great treatises of 1520 and his pamphlet on monastic vows in 1522 (by which time he had been banned in the Holy Roman Empire and his books burned), he was clear about the futility and danger to souls of vows of virginity and celibacy. He believed there were

17. In The Beginning of Ideology (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), Donald R. Kelley makes connections between domestic patriarchy and the masculine imagery and rhetoric of the reformers: “The prime source of authority [and so of tyranny] in the sixteenth century . . . was not prince or pope but rather father” [p. 77]. According to Kelley, “Lutheranism in particular was a masculine affair” [p. 76].

not two classes of Christians, inside and outside religious life, but one class only, and that all had “vowed enough in baptism, more than we can ever fulfil.” 19 Furthermore, “those who trust in works and vows destroy their own faith in the process.” 20

Luther was especially appalled at vows taken by young people before they awakened to their sexual natures and needs, and he urged women as well as men to acknowledge their sexuality. In 1524 he wrote to three nuns who had asked his advice about leaving their convent:

The other ground is the flesh. Although women are ashamed to acknowledge this, Scripture and experience teach us that there is only one in several thousands to whom God gives the gift to live chastely in a state of virginity . . . God also wills that it be natural for a man and a woman to live together in matrimony. This is enough, therefore, and no woman need be ashamed of that for which God has created and fashioned her. 21

Luther believed that chastity was a special grace, granted by God to a few individuals and for limited periods even to them. Lifelong celibacy and consecrated virginity he regarded as dangerous, unhealthy, and nearly impossible, producing “horrible crimes . . . like fornication, adultery, incest, fluxes, dreams, fantasies, pollutions” and hindering “many good things, like the bringing to life of children, the activity of the state, and economic life”—a cogent summary of the complex and intertwined agendas of the sixteenth century. 22

22. Table Talk, LW, vol. 54, p. 335 [WA TR no. 4368]. This collection of Luther’s remarks at family meals and other occasions was written down by his friends and
Luther's apparent acceptance of sexuality, and his genuine and fervent disapproval of celibacy, masked real ambivalence; he maintained an Augustinian attitude toward sexual passion without Augustine's faith in the possibility and desirability of repression and sublimation. In his *Lectures on Genesis*, begun in 1535 (ten years after his own marriage), Luther said that while God's command to be fruitful would have been a delightful obligation had there been no Fall, sin had attached to procreation an "unavoidable leprosy of the flesh." He described the shame experienced by husbands and wives in "so hideous and frightful a pleasure that physicians compare it with epilepsy or falling sickness." Predictably, ambivalence about sex was reflected in attitudes toward women. On the positive side, Luther rejected the Aristotelian and scholastic designation of women as misbegotten males: "But let themselves be monsters and sons of monsters—these men who make malicious statements and ridicule a creature of God . . . created by a special counsel of God." In his inimitable style, he excoriated the Bishop of Mainz, who "was irritated by no annoyance more than by the stinking, putrid private parts of women. That godless knave, forgetful of his mother and his sister, dares to blaspheme God's creature through whom he was himself born." Women's domestic roles, especially motherhood, ought to be sufficient protection against such scandalous attacks. This defense of course left women vulnerable outside the family—but Luther wanted all women placed safely inside.

Notwithstanding his defense of wives and mothers against the misogyny of celibate men, Luther's domestic prescriptions were based on biological assumptions that were not particularly advanced. In a notorious "joke" he remarked that "men have broad shoulders and narrow hips, and accordingly they possess intelligence. Women have narrow shoulders and broad hips. Women ought to stay at home; the way they were created indicates this, for they have broad hips and a wide fundament to sit upon." In

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24. *Table Talk*, p. 171 (WA TR no. 2807b).
25. Ibid., p. 8 (WA TR no. 55).
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a more serious context, a lecture on the striped and speckled flocks of Genesis 30, an anecdote reveals the physiological notions underlying Luther’s theories:

I remember that when I was a boy at Eisenach, a beautiful and virtuous matron gave birth to a dormouse. This happened because one of the neighbors had hung a little bell on a dormouse in order that the rest might be put to flight when the bell made a sound. This dormouse met the pregnant woman, who, ignorant of the matter, was so terrified by the sudden meeting and sight of the dormouse that the fetus in her womb degenerated into the shape of the little beast. Such examples are all too common.26

Biology was not all that kept women at home, for the subjection of wives was a consequence of the Fall. Eve was “very free” in the first creation, but now “the rule remains with the husband, and the wife is compelled to obey him by God’s command. He rules the home and the state, wages wars, defends his possessions, tills the soil, builds, plants, etc. The woman, on the other hand, is like a nail driven into the wall. She sits at home.”27 “Woman” and “wife” had become interchangeable. Genesis 3 declared wives subject to husbands, not women to men. But because the reformers believed that all women should marry, subjection became the fate of all women, not of wives only.

His own marriage and fatherhood supplied Luther with insight into pregnancy and birth, although conception remained mysterious. He found it “worthy of wonder that a woman receives semen, that this semen becomes thick and . . . is congealed and then is given shape and nourished until the fetus is ready for breathing air”; God “takes a drop from the blood of the father and creates a human being.” The suggestion was that fathers are the true parents of their children, but Luther knew very well that the divine work of procreation, and of sustaining the life of a newborn, was accomplished through women: “When the fetus has been brought into the world by birth, no new nourishment appears, but a new way and method: from the two breasts, as from a fountain, there

flows milk by which the baby is nourished.” Thus, the mother’s milk and father’s semen alike are identified with blood: each is an aspect of one life-creating and sustaining fluid.

Like Erasmus, Luther described the breasts of the new mother as “fountains,” but he credited God, not “nature,” with the spontaneous supply of nourishment for the infant. He assumed that mothers suckled their own children, as was the custom in his circle, unlike that of Erasmus’s more sophisticated acquaintance. In a much more earthy and practical style than that of Eutrapelus and Fabulla, the qualities of mother’s milk and the proper method of weaning an infant were discussed at Luther’s table, along with comparisons of the “best” breasts for lactation and appearance.

The contemplation of motherhood filled Luther with awe at God’s loving design. He observed that “the entire female body was created for the purpose of nurturing children. How prettily even little girls carry babies on their bosom!” God made them to be mothers; men were clumsy “at the simplest tasks around the baby!” Like Erasmus, he believed that women were designed for motherhood, but he did not romanticize pregnancy and birth. He lived with Katie through six pregnancies and knew something about them: “From the beginning . . . a woman suffers very painful headaches, dizziness, nausea, an amazing loathing of food and drink, frequent and difficult vomiting, toothache, and a stomach disorder.” Birth was even more frightening, for “when the fetus has matured and birth is imminent, there follows the most awful distress, because only with utmost peril and almost at the cost of her life does she give birth.” In short, countless dangers of miscarriages, monsters, and various deformities surround pregnant women, whose husbands ought to attend and care for them.

Despite all these difficulties, conception and birth remained marvelous works of God; only “because of their continued recur-

28. Ibid., pp. 126–127 (WA 42.94–95).
29. Table Talk, p. 321 (WA TR no. 4105). For Luther, breast-feeding was one of a mother’s routine tasks: “A wife too should regard her duties in the same light, as she suckles the child, rocks and bathes it, and cares for it in other ways”; see “The Estate of Marriage,” LW, vol. 45, p. 40 (WA 102.289).
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ence they have come to be regarded as commonplace, and we have verily become deaf to this lovely music of nature."\(^{31}\) The "lovely music" was equated with God’s will and with women’s work. Even before he was married, Luther wrote a lengthy treatise, "The Estate of Marriage," recommending to all Christians the "golden and noble works" of parenthood. For women, this was the very purpose of existence: "If you were not a woman you should now wish to be one for the sake of this very work alone, that you might thus gloriously suffer and even die in the performance of God’s work and will."\(^{32}\)

Luther’s assumptions about God’s will for women and the cause for which they might suffer and die were exactly opposite to those of medieval hagiography—for example, of the *Golden Legend*, with its tales of women who died to preserve their virginity. Rejecting the model of the ancient saints and martyrs, Luther declared that even pastoral counseling of women in childbirth ought to be shaped by a proper understanding of the female vocation:

This is also how to comfort and encourage a woman in the pangs of childbirth, not by repeating St. Margaret legends and other silly old wives’ tales but by speaking thus, “Dear Grete, remember that you are a woman, and that this work of God in you is pleasing to him. Trust joyfully in his will and let him have his way with you. Work with all your might to bring forth the child. Should it mean your death, then depart happily, for you will die in a noble deed and in subservience to God.”\(^{33}\)

As the “noble deed” was no longer the preservation of virginity for Christ, St. Margaret and St. Katherine could serve no longer as exemplary figures. They were replaced by the wives of the Hebrew patriarchs, women who recognized their own true nature and had a passion for offspring: “The saintly women desire nothing else than the natural fruit of their bodies. For by nature woman has been created for the purpose of bearing children. Therefore she has

31. *Genesis 1–5*, p. 126. [WA 42.94].
33. Ibid.
breasts; she has arms for the purpose of nourishing, cherishing, and carrying her offspring.” Leah, for example, was “a chaste and saintly matron who has an aversion for lust and desires the birth of children.” These Hebrew “saints” recognized their duty to the patriarchy: “They already had children before, yet they bore in mind that children are mortal. . . . Therefore if one woman had had even a hundred children, still she would always have desired more, for they had in view the promised descendants to whom the preaching they had heard from their husband pertained.” Luther reminded his congregations that among the Hebrews, who properly understood sterility as divine punishment, childless women were “rejected and cursed before God.” Rachel wept during her six years without children, and when she “wanted to sleep with her husband, she did so only in order to become a mother and to increase the house of Jacob, who had the promise.”

Luther scolded those who enjoyed the pleasures of marriage but avoided procreation, “those who are devoted to idleness and laziness and shun the sweat and toil of marriage. But the purpose of marriage is not to have pleasure and to be idle but to procreate and bring up children, to support a household. . . . Those who have no love for children are swine, stocks, and logs unworthy of being called men or women; for they despise the blessing of God, the Creator and Author of marriage.” Luther believed that a major purpose of life was to raise children and held a high view of the role of parents as “apostles, bishops, and priests to their children, for it is they who make them acquainted with the gospel . . . there is no greater or nobler authority on earth than that of parents over their children, for this authority is both spiritual and temporal.”

Just as Luther’s doctrines of God and of ministry shaped his ideas about the work of parents, his experience of parenthood shaped his theology. When he thought about himself and Katie in their protective care for baby Martin or their correction of little Hans, he better understood God’s relation to humanity. The reformers associated parenthood with divine power and righteous-
nness to a degree that went beyond the traditional assignment to God of the attributes of fathers. The authority and status of mothers were limited by subordination to their husbands, but fatherhood was nearly merged with divinity. Medieval fathers had held enormous powers over their children, but sixteenth-century fathers acquired also a kind of moral righteousness, an assumption of benevolence and correctness that made disobedience a sin as well as a crime. Paternal tyranny had always been a realistic possibility; when justice and righteousness were added to unrestricted power, the psychological and emotional dimensions of modern patriarchy began to take shape.38

Luther himself was a loving father, proud of his family and closely involved with his children. His experience with daughters, as well as his conviction that all Christians should read the Scriptures, persuaded him that schools ought to be established in every town—even schools for girls.39 Like so many of their contemporaries, Martin and Katie suffered the loss of children, one in infancy and a daughter at thirteen. When Magdalena died, Luther was heartbroken; he held his child and, “weeping bitterly, prayed that God might will to save her.”40 During her last illness he sent for his older son: “She herself longs so much to see her brother that I feel compelled to send a carriage [for him]. They loved each other so much, perhaps his arrival could bring her some relief. I am doing what I can so that later the knowledge of having left something undone does not torture me.”41 He worried when his son did not recover quickly from the loss, fearing that he had “turned soft

38. In When Fathers Ruled: Family Life in Reformation Europe (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983), Steven Ozment noted with admiration the identification of domestic, civic, and moral virtue in early modern Europe: “The home, then, was no introspective, private sphere, unmindful of society, but the cradle of citizenship, extending its values and example into the world around it. The habits and character developed within families became the virtues that shaped entire lands” (p. 9); “The home was a model of benevolent and just rule for the ‘state’ to emulate” (p. 177).
40. Table Talk, p. 431 [WA TR No. 5496].
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through the words of his mother, in addition to mourning over his sister’s death." 42

Luther himself—an adult, and convinced of the righteousness of God—was also vulnerable to "softness": "I’m angry with myself that I’m unable to rejoice from my heart and be thankful to God . . . I am joyful in spirit but I am sad according to the flesh. . . . It’s strange to know that she is surely at peace . . . and yet to grieve so much." Yet aware of the novelty as well as the pain of his circumstances, Luther noted that "in the last thousand years God has given to no bishop such great gifts as he has given to me." 43

As one consequence of his struggle for faith in God’s justice and his interpretation of the divine will, Luther married and established a family. His experience instructed him and he instructed others in a passionate commitment to marriage and family: "Marriage should be treated with honor, from it we all originate, because it is a nursery not only for the state but also for the church and the kingdom of Christ until the end of the world." 44 The divine injunction to increase and multiply was taken very seriously: the production and raising of children became a central responsibility of all Christians, but especially of women. Scripture and "nature" alike revealed their duty: "A woman does not have complete mastery over herself. God so created her body that she should be with a man and bear and raise children. The words of Gen., ch. 1, clearly state this, and the members of her body sufficiently show that God himself formed her for this purpose." 45

The roles of mothers and fathers were complementary: fathers were to guide, guard, direct, and provide for the family and to represent the household in church and state. Mothers were to be devout but to express their spirituality at home through care for the family. In Protestant Europe motherhood became a sign, even a precondition, of a woman’s moral and physical health. Obedience

42. Ibid., p. 239 [WA Br 10.728–729].
43. Table Talk, pp. 430, 432. [WA TR no. 5494, 5498]. Luther said of St. Jerome: "I wish he had had a wife, for then he would have written many things differently" (p. 72; WA TR No. 445).
44. Genesis 1–5, p. 240 [WA 42.178].
45. Letters of Spiritual Counsel, p. 271 [WA Br 3.327].
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replaced virginity and poverty as the essential female virtue and road to holiness; a good woman obeyed God and her husband—whose wills, increasingly, were identified—and raised virtuous children. By the middle of the sixteenth century it was difficult, or nearly impossible, for a woman to be a good Christian except through marriage and motherhood.

In Strasbourg after the reform, prayers were said in the churches for pregnant women, and the Church Ordinance declared that a woman’s “greatest honor on earth is her fertility.” The chief architect of the Strasbourg reformation, Martin Bucer, left a Dominican monastery in 1518, persuaded by the voice and arguments of Luther. In time Bucer came to differ with Luther over various theological points, but he always agreed about the importance of marriage, family, and education. In 1550 he wrote on Christ’s kingdom for the young Edward VI of England; its coming, he believed, depended on cooperation between the churches and the civil government. In England such cooperation rested on the king’s good will, and Bucer reminded Edward of his responsibility for the proper ordering of marriage, “this very sacred relationship, the font of the human race.” He suggested that “guardians of matrimony” be appointed in the churches, “godly men” whose task was to ensure that husbands provided for their wives and that wives obeyed their husbands, “for unless this source and nursery of good citizenship, holy marriage, is most carefully preserved . . . what . . . can be hoped for the increase of good citizens and the hoped-for ordering and sanctification of the state?” All civil governments, whether of kings or urban councils, held vital responsibility for marriage and for the good order of the households in which citizens and church members were produced and socialized.

In the cities of continental Europe, particularly in imperial cities whose overlord was far away, urban councils assumed responsibility for reforming the churches and for morality as well as public

47. Bucer, De regno Christi xv, xxi, pp. 152, 164–165.
peace and welfare. Lyndal Roper has examined the implications of reformation in Augsburg, especially in the craft workshops of that city, where the “politics of marriage” domesticated the reforming impulse. Roper makes plain the interconnections of religion, politics, and households: “By promising a religion of wedded life and a politics of the control of marriage, the evangelical message recruited substantial portions of the guildfolk for a Reformation which favored them, and which gave powerful articulation to the craft values of order, discipline, and the authority of the master.” Traditional medieval notions of holiness were definitively overturned when marriage was identified with godliness and productive work, celibacy with vice and idleness. Single women were required to lodge with a family or leave town; journeymen had to marry before they could become masters. Marriage was associated with age, seniority, and power as well as virtue, so that potential class conflicts were disguised and reoriented according to a sex/gender system that encouraged young, unruly, unmarried men to conform rather than rebel. By enforcing gendered standards of behavior and accountability, the Marriage Court established what Roper has described as “the moral ethic of the urban Reformation.” The politics of theology and gender linked the reformers’ devotion to marriage and procreation to the early development of the social and economic institutions of modern Europe.48

Like the German cities, Calvinist Geneva was managed by an oligarchy composed of business and ecclesiastical leaders. Marriage was established as the exclusive option for successful adults; the Consistory summoned recalcitrant young men and told them that it was time to marry.49 Calvin himself was encouraged and assisted by his colleagues when he looked for a wife; he lacked confidence about his suitability for marriage, but no respectable man could remain single, and certainly not the town’s most prominent minister. With his tense, reserved personality and without children of his own, Calvin never developed the passionate enthui

siasm and interest in family characteristic of Luther and other leading reformers. Nonetheless, he acknowledged the scriptural injunction toward procreation and affirmed the centrality of marriage and child raising in Christian society. Like Luther, Calvin noted the heroism required of childbearing women and displayed a sympathetic recognition of the physical and emotional consequences of motherhood: the “tedium of pregnancy, distaste for food, illness, difficulty in giving birth . . . anxiety for the fetus.”

The magisterial reformers appreciated the faith and devotion of their wives and of all respectable, reformed married women. They recognized motherhood as vital work, deserving sympathy and protection. But their celebration of women’s work inside the household did not address the needs or circumstances of women outside the domestic system, whether or not they were mothers. At the opposite extreme—and as far as possible—from their own homes, reforming councils shut down brothels and drove prostitutes from the cities, depriving many women (and their children, of course) of their livelihood. Traditionally, brothels had been regarded as an accommodation for young unmarried men, but the reformers wanted everyone to marry, and to marry young. Luther blamed parents for “unparental conduct when they see that their child is grown up and is fit for and inclined toward marriage, and yet are unwilling to assist and counsel him thereto . . . they are in duty bound to assist their children to marry, removing them from the perils of unchastity. Acknowledging the sexual energy of the young, the reformers attempted to sweep it into safe channels of domesticity.


51. John Calvin, Commentary on 1 Tim. 2:15, in Ioniis Calvini Opera (Brunswick: Schwetschke, 1895), 53:278. Calvin insisted that marriage and motherhood do not constitute a woman’s whole duty unless they proceed from faith and love of God. In Sermon 19 on the same text (52:228), he compared the acceptable sacrifice of women who “clean up [their children’s] filth and kill their lice” to the useless lives of nuns and whores (closely identified with one another) in whom Eve’s sin is not redeemed.

In the sixteenth century, middle- and working-class women were gradually excluded from guilds and from official posts in the towns, narrowing their economic as well as social options. Unmarried women were encouraged to enter domestic service in preference to other business or professions, because such work kept them “safe” in households headed by masters. Some married women with children chose part-time work with lower status and pay in order better to serve their families. The celebration and spiritualization of motherhood within male-headed households had complex and long-lived consequences for mothers and children in the developing economy of early modern Europe.

Among the most articulate proponents of love, marriage, and motherhood were the Puritans of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England and New England. They promoted literacy for both men and women, and because they developed the habit of examining their lives and feelings along with their consciences, their letters and journals addressed intimate domestic as well as religious affections. Puritan poetry, sermons, and legal documents provide a record of familial emotion and experience more extensive than anything available for medieval Europe. Their appreciation of conjugal passion went far beyond Luther’s ambivalence; they assumed the centrality of married love in the economy of salvation.

In *Paradise Lost* the greatest Puritan poet celebrated the lovemaking of the first parents. Milton marked their innocence and enthusiasm:

nor turn’d I ween
Adam from his fair Spouse, nor Eve the Rites
Mysterious of connubial love refus’d:
Whatever Hypocrites austerely talk

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53. In *Working Women*, pp. 75–92, Wiesner points out that “women’s work” was increasingly “defined as that which required little training or initial capital, could be done in spare time, and was done by men only as a side occupation, carried low status, and was informally organized and badly paid” (p. 92).
Of purity and place and innocence,
Defaming as impure what God declares
Pure, and commands to some, leaves free to all.
Our Maker bids increase, who bids abstain
But our Destroyer, foe to God and Man?

Sexual abstinence was the Devil’s program; marriage, God’s:

Hail wedded Love, mysterious Law, true source
Of human offspring.

Milton sang a lullaby over Adam and Eve:

Sleep on,
Blest pair; and O yet happiest if ye seek
No happier state, and know to know no more.54

Their blessedness, and that of all humanity after them, depended not on love alone, however, but on an ordered relationship. Eve’s body and soul belonged to her husband: Adam, not God, was her “Author and Disposer.”55 When Eve became too independent for a good wife, and Adam too obliging for a proper husband, the disruption of domestic order produced cosmic catastrophe.

Milton’s assumptions were not unique; such ideas can be found in sermons and household books as well as epic poetry. Preachers reiterated domestic values and virtues, setting forth appropriate relationships between husbands and wives, parents and children, masters and servants. In the section of his Catechism devoted to “The Offices of All Degrees,” Thomas Becon used didactic dialogues between a father and son to spell out the privileges and responsibilities of every station. Father and son discussed the duties of magistrates (“ordained of God”), ministers, citizens (“who ought to love and reverence the civil magistrates”), husbands, wives, widows, maids, schoolteachers, poor men, and every

55. Ibid., 4.635, p. 293.
other imaginable group. Becon offered the example of Monica not to mothers but to wives—because Monica patiently tolerated her husband’s brutality, hid his faults from outsiders, and blamed other women for their husbands’ abuse. The marital relationship remained at the center of the English Puritans’ attention to domestic matters.

Mothers had a vital, if circumscribed role in Becon’s chain of duty and command. They were reminded that God gave them breasts for a purpose and a penance, that they offended God and corrupted their children if they failed to nurse. Fathers were supposed to see that their wives, by nursing, followed the example of “ancient godly matrons of the old testament” and of “the mother of Christ, Mary the Virgin.” Young children required primarily physical care and protection from “bodily harm . . . by fire, water, overlaying, or otherwise.” These were a mother’s responsibility; fathers had to attend to the family’s support. Parenthood was always presented in the context of the conjugal household, and it was assumed that widows and widowers would remarry as soon as possible. The duty of both mother and father was to see to their offspring’s education and behavior and to be sure that the children in turn were properly married in good time so that the cycle could begin again.

Because maternal and infant mortality remained extremely high in early modern times, motherhood and death were still closely associated. When Puritan women prepared for a birth, they prepared also for death, although not always with the certainty of Elizabeth Jocelin, who bought a shroud for herself when she felt the fetus move for the first time. Puritan mothers were not necessarily more aware than their ancestors of the risks of childbirth, but many of them were literate and inclined to record in writing their thoughts and feelings.

57. Ibid., pp. 343–344.
58. Ibid., p. 348.
The flourishing genre of spiritual autobiography was used by women as well as men; mothers tended to write for the benefit and guidance of their children. The New England poet Anne Bradstreet, mother of eight, addressed her "dear children . . . that when I am no more with you, yet I may be daily in your remembrance." Bradstreet's narrative captured the Puritan notion of maternal responsibility: "It pleased God to keep me a long time without a child, which was a great grief to me and cost me many prayers and tears before I obtained one, and after him gave me many more, of whom I now take the care, that as I have brought you into the world, and with great pains, weakness, cares, and fears brought you to this, I now travail in birth again of you till Christ be formed in you."60

The literature of English Puritanism, including sermons and catechisms, emphasized woman's role as wife, consort, helpmate, and lover—like Eve before the Fall, a central figure but secondary and complementary to her husband. Among New England Puritans, on the other hand, women were perceived primarily as mothers. Old women—even those without children, even suspected witches—were called "Mother."61 The title was accorded automatically, and the status assumed: what else could an old woman be, if not a mother?

The reorientation of religion and society around conjugal households in early modern Europe was not restricted to reformed communities, although Protestants produced its initial ideologies of domesticity. An entire literature of argument and justification was inspired by the defense and promotion of clerical marriage and by the closing of convents. In its official, institutional aspect the initial response of the Roman Catholic Church was to adopt a fiercely defensive posture. The third session of the Council of Trent in 1563 affirmed the superiority of virginity to marriage and of clerical celibacy to clerical marriage.62 The major agenda of

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Trent was reform, especially of the training, morals, and service of the regular and secular clergy, whose real and reputed absenteeism, concubinage, and ignorance had provoked so much criticism and caused so much scandal during the late medieval centuries. In relation to sex and marriage, the mood and decrees of Trent ran counter to contemporary trends. In other areas, however—particularly in the restructuring of religious life around the parish and the household—Tridentine reforms ran parallel to contemporary changes and contributed to them. By the early seventeenth century, Roman Catholic teachers had also discovered and developed a distinctive ideology of marriage, motherhood, and holy domesticity.

The sixteenth century was an age of renewed energy and dedication for religious orders; new groups were established for women and men. In Spain the conventual reforms and mystical writings of Teresa of Avila were only one outstanding example of a broad phenomenon of female holiness. In the cities, even outside of convent walls, beatas attracted enthusiastic followings. Identified with the poor and representing the “community of believers,” these women dedicated their lives to service in the new urban centers of sixteenth-century Spain. In other parts of Europe, however, where the Protestant menace was more immediate, the gender-restrictive ethos of Trent prevailed. The tendency of church leaders to respond to criticism by confining women within walls and habits inhibited the contemporary surge of energy for renewal and service. While new and reformed male orders (the Jesuits being only the most notable example) took on the enormous challenge of mission at home and overseas, founders of women’s orders were repeatedly frustrated by the bishops’ insistence on cloister and veil. The battle between episcopal notions of respectability and women’s desire to serve raged in the Tridentine atmosphere of retrenchment and reform.

Not all of the council’s work was reactive. One of its major long-term accomplishments was the establishment of a parish-based Church with an educated, responsible clergy supervised by a reformed episcopate. Inevitably, the parochial emphasis came into conflict with traditional medieval allegiances and associations—with kin and other competing collectivities. The council decreed, for example, that marriages must take place before the couple’s parish priest; John Bossy has pointed out that this requirement “transformed marriage from a social process which the Church guaranteed to an ecclesiastical process which it administered.” While Protestants removed marriage from the authority of church and clergy and handed it over to sanctified civil governments, Roman Catholics insisted on the sacramental nature of marriage and the necessary role of the priest, strengthening the authority of the parish and weakening that of the kin over the bridal pair. Similarly, the Church began to interfere with traditional baptismal practices, and bishops made rules about the selection and number of godparents; here too, parish competed with kin for the allegiance of new recruits. Roman Catholic parishes, bulwark of the reformed Church, were made up of households based, like Protestant households, upon the conjugal family. Catholics never ceased to insist vigorously upon the value of consecrated virginity and clerical celibacy, but simultaneously the Church developed an increasing dependence upon the conjugal family, supported by a specifically Catholic ideology of marriage and domesticity.

Roman Catholic as well as Protestant domestic teaching was rooted in the work of Catholic humanists such as Erasmus and More. Sixteenth-century preachers and spiritual directors, wishing to address the needs of men and women in the transformed world of early modern Europe, took marriage and family responsibilities very seriously. The influential Francis de Sales, a popular preacher and confessor, wrote *Introduction to the Devout Life* for...
lay people in 1609. He reminded Christians that “devotion should be practiced in different ways by the gentleman, the artisan, the servant, the prince, the widow, the young girl, and the wife,” pointing out that it would be “ridiculous, unruly, and indefensible” to expect married people to want to be poor, like Capuchins, or to expect an artisan to spend as much time in church as a monk.68 Class and gender were essential variables in spiritual life. Office and role frequently required good Christian people to participate in activities unsuitable for the life of a religious: De Sales remembered Elizabeth of Hungary, who sometimes played games and danced “without injury to her devotion, which was firmly rooted in her soul.”69 Even a queen, enmeshed in public affairs, could (and must) impress her child with the fear and love of God: St. Louis’s faithful attention to his mother’s teaching was the bishop’s favorite example of the value of a devout life in the world.70

De Sales certainly did not share the Puritans’ enthusiasm for conjugal sex, but he did believe that marital intercourse could be holy and responsible. He used the modesty and restraint of the elephant to point his moral: “He never changes his mate; he loves tenderly the one he has chosen and is with her only every three years, and then only for five days, so secretly that he is never seen in the act. When he can be seen again on the sixth day he goes straight to a river, in which he washes his entire body all over before he returns to the herd.”71

De Sales aspired to missionary work among the Huguenots and served as bishop-in-exile of Calvinist Geneva. Although he naturally acknowledged no influence, he did share the Calvinists’ appreciation of worldly vocation—an attitude having more to do with the times, perhaps, than with any particular confession. His letters reveal that he consistently urged wealthy, well-born women to avoid giving offense to husbands, parents, or other

70. Ibid., p. 510.
71. Ibid., 39, p. 513.
family members by spending too much time in church or neglecting their households. "We must, if we can, try not to make our devotion annoying," he said; the behavior of Margery Kempe would have horrified him. He suggested in a letter that the trials and disappointments of upper-class life be used to spiritual advantage:

I know a lady, one of the greatest souls that I have met, who lived for a long time in such subjection to her husband's moods that in spite of her ardor and devotion she had to wear low-necked dresses and dress up in all kinds of vanities. Except at Easter, she could go to communion only in secret, deceiving everyone, otherwise she would have caused a thousand storms in her household; by this road she advanced to a great height.

He told his correspondent that it was preferable to miss Mass than to annoy her "two superiors"—her father and her husband. Mentioning Paula, and even Angela of Foligno, as models of women who served God, the bishop overlooked or refused to recognize their rejection and defiance of family pressures and responsibilities.72

In certain respects, Salesian teaching resembled that of Martin Luther, but it had a distinctive cast. He called marriage "the nursery of Christianity, which fills the earth with faithful people to complete in heaven the number of the elect. Therefore, the preservation of the goodness of marriage is extremely important to the state because it is the root and source of all its streams." He emphasized the third "fruit" of marriage: "the production and lawful raising of children. It is a great honor to you, married people, that God, wanting to multiply the number of souls who can bless and praise Him to all eternity, has made you His partners in such a wonderful work." Parents produced the "bodies into which He infuses, like heavenly drops, the souls as He creates them."73

De Sales was extremely respectful of the physical and spiritual burdens of motherhood. He wrote to one of his correspondents: "Look after yourself very carefully while you are pregnant; do not

be in the least anxious about keeping yourself to any sort of spiritual exercise, except in a most gentle way. If you get tired of kneeling, sit down; if you have not sufficient concentration to pray for half an hour, then make it a quarter of an hour or even half of that.” Such instruction would have distressed Dorothea of Montau, but de Sales was concerned for the child to come and for the woman’s duty to her husband and family. Like Erasmus, he assumed that spiritual health and vigor were influenced by bodily states: “our souls usually catch the qualities and conditions of our bodies.” Spiritual heaviness, like physical pain, could be offered to the crucified Christ.\textsuperscript{74}

Devout, obedient mothers might be rewarded by holy children, who repaid any amount of suffering. St. Bernard’s mother, “well suited to such a son, taking her children in her arms as soon as they were born, offered them to Jesus Christ, and from then on loved them with the respect due to something sacred, entrusted to her by God. This had the happiest results, as all seven of them eventually became very holy.”\textsuperscript{75} De Sales commented upon the mother-child relationship from several points of view, including that of a grown child who resented maternal overprotection and interference with her spiritual life. He urged an adult daughter to be more sympathetic, to realize that mothers wanted “to carry their children forever, especially only children, between their breasts . . . one can never love [such a mother] enough [and] the only remedy is patience: God is not jealous of time spent with parents.”\textsuperscript{76}

The best-known disciple of Francis de Sales found her way to religious life and sainthood despite heavy domestic pressures and the “family first” themes of Salesian piety. Jane Frances de Chantal (1572–1641) grew up in a pious family of the noblesse de la robe; her father was president of the Dijon parlement. At twenty she married Baron Guy de Rabutin-Chantal and took over the management of his estates. Like earlier pious married women of

\textsuperscript{74} De Sales, letter 827, 6:214.
\textsuperscript{75} De Sales, \textit{Vie dévote}, chap. 38, 3:510. The memory of St. Bernard and his family was powerful in Dijon, home of Mme. de Chantal.
\textsuperscript{76} De Sales, letter 660, 6:15. Angela of Foligno called her mother a hindrance in the way of salvation and rejoiced at her death.
the upper class, she practiced charity by caring for poor and sick dependents, especially women in childbirth and nursing mothers. Her son Celse-Benigne was born in 1596, then three daughters in 1598, 1599, and 1601—the year her husband died in a hunting accident. From intense mourning, Madame de Chantal turned to prayer; much later, she recalled feeling not only grief, but joy at the spiritual opportunities of widowhood. She reduced her household, gave away her jewelry, took a vow of chastity, and devoted herself to her children and to prayer. Elizabeth of Hungary was one of her models, and she found a spiritual director who resembled Conrad of Marburg; if he did not abuse her physically, he tormented her psychologically and made her promise not to discuss her spiritual life, or their relationship, with anyone.

When Chantal met Francis de Sales in 1604, the two were immediately drawn to each other, and she was able to cast off her promise to her confessor. She renewed her vow of chastity and took a vow of obedience to de Sales which both regarded as a solemn, lifelong commitment. Later, when her eldest daughter married his young brother, the two families were joined. Francis de Sales occupied the center of Chantal’s emotional and spiritual life after 1604: he was her confessor, her closest friend, and her partner in the establishment of a new religious foundation. The Order of the Visitation was designed for the spiritual benefit of its members and for service in the world. The founders intended the nuns to take simple vows and to go out to tend the sick—although that aspect of the plan was soon frustrated by the Archbishop of Lyons. The Visitation was meant to accommodate not only young, unmarried women but widows with children, like Chantal herself.

Between 1604 and 1610—the year Chantal achieved her fondest wish and became a religious (later the abbess) of the Visitation—de Sales encouraged her to regard herself as a novice whose training and necessary discipline were taking place at home. He called the Virgin Mary her abbess and St. Monica her novice mistress—two women whose spirituality had not been hindered by a mother’s

77. In Madame de Chantal (London: Faber & Faber, 1962), p. 45 n.1, Elisabeth Stopp cites on this point the deposition of the Archbishop of Sens at Chantal’s canonization.
essential work. He provided advice and instruction not only on prayer and meditation but also on her children’s care and education—especially that of Celse-Benigne, who gave a good deal of trouble then and later. When the boy was eight years old, de Sales wrote: “We must plant in his little soul noble and valiant aspirations towards God’s service, and discourage ideas of purely worldly glory.” Sexual impurity was the greatest danger for any child: “Take care not only for him but also his sisters, that they sleep alone . . . or else with people in whom you have as much confidence as you do in yourself. This advice is incredibly important; experience commends it to me every day.” He recommended St. Jerome’s letter on the training of girls as an aid in “root[jing] out vanity of soul from all the girls; it seems almost inborn in the sex.” His friendships with Chantal and many other distinguished women were not sufficient to loosen sexual stereotypes.

In 1610 Celse-Benigne was fourteen years old and preparing to leave home; the eldest daughter was married, and the youngest had died. After years of effort, Madame de Chantal had persuaded her father and father-in-law to let her go, accompanied by her second daughter, to enter the first foundation of the Visitation at Annecy. When the family gathered to say goodbye, Celse-Benigne made a terrible scene: throwing himself across the doorway, he cried that his mother would have to walk over him to leave home. Chantal’s contemporary biographer, Maupas du Tour, calling her a “true Paula of our times,” praised the courage and self-sacrifice required to leave her beloved son in such circumstances.

78. De Sales, letter 390, 5:441.
79. Ibid. It is unlikely that in the Chantal household children were abused as sexual playthings, as was apparently the case in some noble as well as royal households, if the childhood experience of Louis XIII can be judged at all typical. See David Hunt, Parents and Children; also Elizabeth Wirth Marvick, “Nature Versus Nurture: Patterns and Trends in Seventeenth-Century French Child-Rearing,” in De Mause, The History of Childhood, pp. 259–301.
80. De Sales, letter 390, 5:441.
Celse-Benigne also had heard of Paula’s son, the little Toxotius, who reached out his arms to his departing mother. The image clung to Chantal’s reputation, and depending on the interpreter’s point of view, she was heroic or heartless enough to proceed with her leavetaking over such a protest. Celse-Benigne reproached his mother but not the co-founder of their order, with whom he remained on good terms. Just a few months later, de Sales wrote him an affectionate letter about the dangers of life at court, warning him against vanity and ambition and “bad books . . . [especially] those of that infamous Rabelais.”

Chantal continued to worry about her son’s debts and duels; these dangers to his soul upset her more than the death in childbirth of her “dear, amiable” elder daughter. On that sad occasion she wrote to her nephew: “The holy and happy death of that dear soul is a great consolation to me, whereas the life of [Celse-Benigne] afflicts me with sadness and upsets me so much that I do not know where to turn except to Providence . . . leaving in [God’s] hands the salvation and honor of this half-lost child. Oh! what incomparable grief and affliction, my dear nephew! No other comes close to it.” For this Catholic mother, as for Luther, a woman’s death in childbirth was a good death, the equivalent of a soldier’s sacrifice. She was greatly relieved when Celse-Benigne died honorably in battle and not as she had feared, in a duel.

The situation of mothers like Chantal, who lived intense spiritual lives and even entered religious orders but were permitted and expected to watch over their children, was painful and ambiguous for both parent and child. The mothers were torn between the exclusive commitment to God required of persons in religious life and the powerful commitment to children expected of Christian mothers in the seventeenth century. According to contempo-

82. De Sales, letter 888, 6:266.
84. Chantal reminded her newly widowed daughter-in-law “of all the occasions in which he risked his eternal salvation” (ibid., letter 1041, 3:273). Responding to friends who wrote letters of sympathy about Celse-Benigne’s death, she made distinctions between her inclination to thank God for his “good” death, a response “according to the spirit,” and her “natural” suffering (letters 1039–1045, 3:270–278).
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r ary notions, their children were entitled to a passionate, single-minded maternal devotion, a devotion incompatible with the traditional sacrifice of "carnal" affections by holy men and women. Francis de Sales was at least somewhat aware of this dilemma, and in 1613 he advised Chantal how to behave during a visit from her son: "I am distressed not to be able to watch the caresses he will receive from a mother who is insensible to everything connected with natural love, for I believe that these caresses will be terribly mortified. Ah, no, my dear daughter, do not be so cruel! Let this poor lad Celse-Benigne see how happy you are to have him with you; we must not show outwardly all of a sudden that our natural passions have died within us!"85

By early modern times, the "natural passions" of motherhood were not only acceptable but essential and admirable in a pious Roman Catholic woman. The spirituality and good works of a Paula or Birgitta might be exemplary, but saints who left their children, as well as virgin-martyrs, had become problematic models for Christian mothers. Heroic holiness and canonization were not lively options for laywomen in the seventeenth century.86 Chantal struggled to achieve renunciation in the traditional mode, and she became a nun and a saint—but very much against the current of Salesian piety, which was designed for men and women in the transformed early modern world. Laywomen were expected to put aside their own desires—even desires for spiritual growth—in order to teach and inspire their children, and to find their rewards in that homely work. Outside of clerical and religious life, where celibacy and virginity were obligatory in most cases and deeply respected in all, Roman Catholics—like Protestants—were expected to marry and to raise children for God, for the church, and for the state. The new ideologies of domesticity and of motherhood were not confined within confessional boundaries.

The population of Europe increased slowly in the sixteenth century, and the sex ratio, which had begun to favor women in

86. See Weinstein and Bell, Saints and Society, pp. 221, 226–238.

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the thirteenth century, kept moving in that direction. By 1500 there were more women than men in every age group and therefore many unmarried women, especially in the older cohorts, where widows as well as spinsters filled the ranks. With the closing of convents in Protestant communities, large numbers of single women had to find new means of support and ways of living. The reformers took responsibility for finding husbands for many former nuns, but obviously not for all.

The economic, social, and ideological changes of the sixteenth century made life difficult for unmarried women, both widows and spinsters. Increasingly confined to poorly paid and nonprestigious work in domestic service and in the trades and crafts, single women in the towns as well as the country had difficulty earning a living, especially if they were mothers. Their troubles were exacerbated by contemporary ideology that defined the very existence of “masterless” women as a problem. At the same time, women were for the first time declared to be independently capable of crime and legally liable for their own actions, which were no longer the responsibility of a male protector.87 On every level—from John Knox’s “First Blast of the Trumpet against the Monstrous Regiment of Women [rulers]”88 to the harassment of independent old women in villages—the organization of economic, social, moral, and religious life around conjugal households made autonomous female activity, and even existence, ever more difficult.

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, male physicians, male midwives, and male authorities on gynecology, obstetrics,


88. “To promote a woman to bear rule, superiority, dominion, or empire above any realm, nation, or city is repugnant to nature, contumely to God, a thing most contrarious to his revealed will and approved ordinance, and, finally, it is the subversion of good order, of all equity and justice”: “The First Blast of the Trumpet against the Monstrous Regiment of Women [1558],” in The Political Writings of John Knox, ed. Marvin A. Breslow (Washington, D.C.: Folger Shakespeare Library, 1985), p. 42.
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and infant care began to compete with women in the traditional female work of health care for mothers and children. Midwives still worked in villages everywhere and were trained, licensed, and employed by German cities; nevertheless, the long process of denunciation of their competence and contempt for their persons was under way. It became commonplace for midwives to be suspected of every kind of crime and to be blamed for an infant’s deformity or a mother’s death. Traditionally, they had helped women both with contraception and abortion and with problems of infertility; such activities were now likely to be identified as immoral or criminal and to be prosecuted. There is no evidence that the skill or dedication of midwives deteriorated or that their rate of failure and success altered; what did change was attitudes toward birth, toward families, and toward women who held responsibility for the well-being of mothers and children.

The image of the midwife was affected also by the feverish acceleration of trials for witchcraft after the middle of the sixteenth century. Many medieval Christians had believed in witches and feared sorcery and harmful spells, but their Church had discouraged such beliefs and fears as superstition. The Church did not approve or sponsor witch-hunting until late in the fifteenth century, when Innocent VIII published a bull identifying a “present danger” from witches and authorizing two Dominicans to proceed against them. The text produced by Heinrich Kramer and James Sprenger, the infamous Malleus maleficarum of 1486, became extremely influential in the sixteenth century; five hundred years later, the bizarre fixations of its authors still provoke a horrified fascination with witches and witch-hunters.


Kramer and Sprenger identified witchcraft with heresy, and they pronounced authoritatively that most witches were women because of women's inherent wickedness. They also identified the most dangerous work of witches as the evil power they exercised over sex and procreation, "first, by inciting the minds of men to inordinate passion; second, by obstructing their generative force; third, by removing the members accommodated to that act; fourth, by changing men into beasts by their magic art; fifth, by destroying the generative force in women; sixth, by procuring abortion; seventh, by offering children to devils." 

More than 80 percent of the persons tried and executed for witchcraft were women; most of them were poor and elderly, and a significant number had worked as midwives. The image of the witch as anti-wife and anti-mother—a sexual threat instead of a helpmate, and a frightful danger to reproduction and the Christianization of children—was transformed from a clerical fantasy to a murderous reality.

Connections have been perceived between a low birth rate, the growing needs of the state and the economy for soldiers and workers, and the persecution of "witches" who were charged with interfering with procreation. The significance of such connec-

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tions does not depend on recorded changes in sexual behavior or contraceptive practice, about which few data are available. It is certain that a newly anxious attention was focused on conception and birth, areas once understood as women's responsibility, determined by God's inscrutable will. Religious reformers and political theorists spoke and wrote at length of the importance of children and the necessary work of education for the civil society and the kingdom of Christ. Married couples were constantly reminded of the value of their central task of reproduction and socialization.

Furthermore, both Protestant and Catholic reformers insisted on a strict morality intended to confine all sexual activity to married couples. For Roman Catholic clerics, celibacy was not only prescribed, as it had been for four centuries, but rigorously enforced. The new diocesan seminaries indoctrinated students from a young age, and systems of episcopal visitation and discipline were made effective. Clerics and lay people alike were encouraged by trained confessors to examine their consciences in relation to sexual feelings and behavior. Powerful injunctions against fornication, adultery, homosexuality, and masturbation accompanied the new, positive emphasis on marriage and family. In erotic and domestic life, goodness was identified with monogamous marriage and parenthood; it became nearly impossible to be single and virtuous. The Protestant reformers have been credited with producing this situation, but it shaped the lives of Roman Catholics as well.

By the end of the sixteenth century there was a widespread conviction that everyone belonged in a family; even in Roman Catholic religious life the model of male-headed families prevailed. Women and children were not permitted to be "masterless": a woman living on her own, without a husband or father or adult son, was perceived as anomalous at best. If she was old and poor—old enough to be independent, and poor enough to need help and ask for it—she might also be dangerous. Sexual and procreative activities outside of marriage were considered not only problematic but evil and criminal. Prosecutions for bastardy and infanticide kept increasing in the seventeenth century; as it became ever more difficult to raise a child outside of a male-headed family, poor women were more often charged with abandoning
and murdering babies. Women’s energies, feared as chaotic and disorderly, were directed toward marriage and motherhood, which were identified with God’s will and placed under men’s authority. The violent, protracted persecution of witches in early modern Europe was a negative, punitive aspect of the domestication of Christianity. There were no witches in Utopia.

The presence of “witches” in sixteenth-century communities betrayed the hopes and violated the intentions of Christian humanists and reformers, who wanted all men and women to live peacefully in the company of blood relations and the “natural” hierarchies of age and sex. True religion, properly understood and interpreted, prescribed ways of living that accorded with nature and with reason. In an ideal society, adult women were wives and mothers—protected, productive, fulfilled. Their sexual, spiritual, and intellectual energies were absorbed in the production and training of Christians for the churches, workers for the marketplace, and citizens for the state. A woman’s duty was to give birth to children (as many as possible), to nourish them physically and morally, and to prepare them for the work of church and society, if they were boys, for motherhood if they were girls. She was inclined toward this work by her physical and psychological being; grace, now identified with nature, need no longer triumph over nature to produce a good woman. A mother was inherently disposed to put the welfare of husband and children before her own aspirations, even aspirations to holiness when these threatened distraction from her true vocation. A good mother was potentially a saint; the two roles were perfectly compatible.

That “good mother” is an extremely familiar figure, for early modern ideologies of Christian motherhood put down sturdy roots

95. Midwives were drawn into this “disciplinary” process: they were required to ask an unmarried woman for the name of the child’s father before they could help with a birth; see Peter C. Hoffer and N. E. H. Hull, Murdering Mothers: Infanticide in England and New England, 1558–1803 (New York: New York University Press, 1981), p. 15. Hoffer and Hull examine the accelerating rate of trials and convictions for bastardy and infanticide in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (see esp. chap. 2). They attribute infanticide to “indifference for infants” (p. ix), but their own work reveals its connections to the increasing stringency of bastardy laws and the criminalization of women.
and flourished in the modern West. With significant modifications in the wake of the Industrial Revolution, they survived in the middle-class cult of domesticity and True Womanhood in the nineteenth century. With further adjustments for secularization and consumer capitalism, the model could still be discerned in the postwar “Mom” of the 1950s. It lives on in the late twentieth century, if only in the rhetoric of the political and religious right. The mother at home, installed in a patriarchal household and naturally inclined toward service and sacrifice, was created for the West in early modern Europe. Her image is so familiar that we fail to recognize its originality: we are inclined to see her as eternal.

Nonetheless, this book has demonstrated that the Christian mother of early modern times was a new phenomenon in the history of the family and of Christianity. Medieval ideologies of motherhood were rejected, revised, and transformed by humanists and reformers in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Luther had to search the Hebrew Scriptures for images of good women; rejecting medieval models and typologies, he turned to ancient sources for help in building something new. Medieval Christian motherhood, which had its complex beginnings in early Christianity, was thoroughly reconstructed at the dawn of the modern age. Its history demonstrates the interplay and manipulation of cultural and religious symbols involved in the construction of motherhood in any age.


98. E.g., “Mothering is probably the most important function on earth. This is a full-time, demanding task. It requires a high order of gentleness, commitment, steadiness, capacity to give, and many other qualities. A woman needs a good man by her side so she will not be distracted and depleted, thus making it possible for her to provide rich humanness to her babies and children. Her needs must be met by the man, and above all she must be made secure”: psychiatrist Harold M. Voth, quoted in Jerry Falwell, Listen, America! (New York: Doubleday, 1980), pp. 129–130. The passage exemplifies not only twentieth-century psychiatry’s acceptance of early modern ideologies of Christian motherhood but its identification of the ideal mother with the middle-class, married woman who does not work outside the home.