

Labor Pains

In the name of him who loved us and gave himself for us, dear brothers and sisters in Christ: Mother's Day was a month or so back. I hope you observed it because it's certainly fitting that we set aside a special day to thank God for the precious gift of our mothers. Besides, it's good for the economy: where would companies like *Hallmark* and most florists be without it? If you were here that Sunday you may remember that I didn't really mention mothers in the sermon I preached. That's because the text didn't lend itself to it. But today's does; so I hope you don't mind me taking time now to celebrate and honor the wonderful women who gave us birth. ...Yes, those *who gave us birth*. ... Funny, as much as I respect motherhood, that term "give birth" has always struck me as rather odd. It seems an inadequate way to describe the miraculous process and work that lies at the heart of what it means to be a mother. *Give birth*: it's so cold and clinical. What's it really supposed to mean, anyway? It's not like you can say, "Here's a birth; I'd like to have it." It's an *okay* way to say it, I guess; but I'm much fonder of the picturesque way it's handled in the Portuguese language in which a woman doesn't give *birth* to her child, instead they say she gives her child *light*. That is, she takes the infant she bears out of the darkness of the womb where she's lovingly held it while it was being formed within her, and she brings it into the glorious light of day. "*Dar a luz*", they say. She gives her baby *light*. Now, that's a much nicer way to say it, don't you think? It suggests to me a bit of a mother's participation in *God's* creative activity that began when he took the dark, shapeless, primordial earth and he turned his loving attention to it, and gave it his Light. And with this in mind, it also helps us see how our mothers are, under God's great providence, responsible for giving us more than just a birth; they give us *light* and *life* and *love* and so much more.

All of which are ample reasons why it's appropriate that we set aside a special day to pay homage to the women God has given to us as our mothers. And there's another important reason they deserve our admiration, and that's the tremendous sacrifices our mothers have made for us. There's no way to deny this truth: Motherhood hurts. Those who choose to fulfill this life-giving role surrender their bodies and possibly their lives for their children. As Kipling wrote in a poem about women who become mothers, "*She who faces death by torture for each life beneath her breast ...*", from the very moment of conception she is set upon by a chain of events that is absolutely guaranteed to result in all kinds of physical and emotional discomfort. Morning sickness, rashes, mood swings caused by a strange new cocktail of hormones coursing through her system, back aches, sleeplessness, Braxton-Hicks contractions ... that completely unbelievable comment made by so many well meaning husbands: "*No, no, dear, not 'fat and bloated'; you look positively radiant.*" And those things are just preliminary to the intense agony of delivery itself. I don't pretend to know what that's like, but I'm reminded of something comedian Bill Cosby said happened while "coaching" his wife through labor. ("Coaching" they call it, as if husbands were technical experts in such matters.) Anyway, as Cosby's wife was experiencing a particularly strong contraction, he asked her if it hurt. She told him, spitting the words between her clenched teeth, that if he took his lower lip in both hands and stretched it up and over the back of his head, he'd find out.

And, you know, the pain and sacrifices of motherhood do not end when the child is born. In many ways they've hardly begun. There's round the clock feedings, sleepless nights with colicky crying, innumerable dirty diapers to change and the same drippy nose to wipe over and over again. There're colds and fevers, cuts and bruises, scraped knees and insect bites, all of which are treated with care by a woman who can often feel the pain of the wounds more

intensely than her patient does. There's that fear that grips the deepest part of her being when for a moment her child cannot be found, or when her child wanders too close to the street or to a hot stove. She endures seemingly endless hours of mind-numbing repetition as nursery rhymes are re-rhymed, stories are reread, songs are re-sung, and patty-cakes are re-patted. When my own children were young, mothers were being subjected to the additional horror of *Barney*: a most insidious form of psychological torture disguised as a smiling purple dinosaur. I expect there's something equally hideous oppressing the mothers of young children today. And as her child grows in years she exchanges the strain of having to keep her child's every move under her constant supervision, to the strain of constantly having to worry about what her child is doing *outside* of her supervision. Nevertheless, through truly Herculean efforts she manages to create and maintain a stable home environment for her children – a safe haven from the storms of this world. And for her efforts she is frequently repaid with disobedience, disrespect, back talk, thanklessness, outright lies, and clever attempts to manipulate her – all of which can (and frequently do) cut through her tender heart like a saber of cold steel. Like I said: being a mother hurts.

And since none of the troubling things I've mentioned thus far are out of the ordinary – and what I mean by that is sometimes the pains of motherhood can be a whole lot worse – it may cause us to wonder why anyone in their right mind would voluntarily take this responsibility on themselves. If you know what terrible things to expect, why do it? And yet, the very fact that we're all here today proves that a lot of presumably sane women (most of them anyway) with full knowledge of what to expect, did it anyway – and many of them did it several times. It's really quite astonishing. And so for all that they have done, and for the sacrifices they have made for us, they richly deserve whatever honors and accolades we can bring to them not just on Mothers Day, but every day, because we can never begin to pay them the debt of gratitude that we owe.

Not that any of them are particularly interested in honors and accolades. Sure, everyone wants to be appreciated for what they do; but that's not why mothers endure the labors and pains we put them through. They find their motivation and true rewards in other ways; in ways that only a mother can. They find them in the work of motherhood itself: in the labors of love that they can shower upon their children. They do it for the joy of seeing the fruit of their labor grow up and come to be responsible people in their own right. To a certain degree they experience vicariously the successes and triumphs of the children they raise. But above all, they do it for the sake of love itself: an intense desire to find fulfillment and happiness in giving oneself to others.

Now, it's not my intent to deify mothers this morning. This is still the Church of Jesus Christ, and even the best mother is a fallen sinner desperately in need of God's grace and forgiveness. We know that. And yet, I think it's fair to say that in motherhood God gives us what is probably the best human picture of his love for us. If a woman undertakes the noble task of motherhood – of bringing a new life into the world – with the certain knowledge of the pain and trouble she is thereby accepting for herself, how much more of a burden do we see the Lord God accepting for himself at the dawn of creation when he gives birth – gives *Light* – to the entire human race. In the early chapters of Genesis we see how with tender care he shapes our first parents knowing full well of the pain and anguish these two and their descendants will cause him. He knows that they will reject him, and he knows how much that will hurt. He can see generations of betrayal and rebellion and turning away from every good thing he wants to give them; he can see the distress he will feel as he watches us inflicting so much misery on ourselves and others by the choices we make. And, of course, he can see the cross by which his only-begotten Son whom he will send into the world will bear the curse and penalty of our

sin. He sees all that coming; but that doesn't stop him; because from his infinite heart flows a self-sacrificial love that is prepared to endure any cost or suffering for the good of his created children. That is to say, he can see past all *his* pain and misery to the full and joyous end he has in mind for his children when they have been made perfect and complete through his work.

And to help us learn what his love for us is all about, and to help us better understand and appreciate it so that we could learn to imitate it, the Lord made our own passage through pain and suffering part of his plan to redeem us. When our first parents fell into sin and all of its terrible consequences, he promised us a Savior who would come through the Seed of the woman. It's immediately after making that promise that he says to the woman (and through her to all women), "I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children." Now, on one hand it is part of the bitter price of sin: "You sinned, and one of the consequences is that now you have to suffer to bring new life into the world." But it's more than that. Because it's connected to the promise of salvation through the woman's Seed, it's a foreshadow of *how* it's going to be through his own pain and suffering that he will bring new life to those who have fallen under the curse of sin and death. So the ordeal every mother willingly accepts in order to bear her child is a message from God that he has built into our race to remind us of how he loves us and what he was willing to do to save us. Just as you were born through someone's painful labor, so you are reborn to eternal life through the painful labor of the Lord Jesus Christ upon the cross. The pain of childbirth is a reminder that we worship a God of love – and being a God of love hurts.

And it isn't only Christian mothers who are privileged to convey this message and reminder in their bodies. Pain and hardship are part of life for every child of God. In today's Epistle reading Peter writes, "Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you, as though something strange were happening to you." You are to expect it. It's guaranteed that you will suffer as a Christian just as surely a mother-to-be must endure the pain of labor. And part of that is because, in a very real sense, each one of us is in a labor of sorts. Every child of God has within a new person born of the Spirit who is struggling against the old fallen nature. That new person is growing, kicking, fighting to be free of its prison of sinful flesh. And that struggle is going to hurt.

This is true for at least three reasons: first because that new person within you can only grow strong and mature at the expense of your old fallen nature. Your selfish desires, your inward focus, your pursuit of personal pleasures at the expense of others – all these things must be put to death. And that's a painful process. It happens when by exposure to God's commands and his expectations for his children that you come to see how far short you fall of fulfilling his law of love. That's what drives us to repent and to come to Christ once again for his forgiveness, hungering and thirsting for the body and blood he gave up for us, and for the renewal of his Spirit that empowers us to live as we ought. This is an ongoing labor for a Christian that we should expect will become more difficult and more painful as time goes on. And we should welcome this: just as a mother-to-be, when she gets late into her third trimester, begins to long for the baby to be delivered, as painful as it will be; so we should desire the painful labor of becoming more Christ-like through the death of the old nature and the growth of the new.

Secondly, the ongoing struggle hurts because as the new Christ-like person within you grows, you will experience greater opposition from the enemies of Christ in the world. The world hated the Lord Jesus and crucified him. It's only natural that as Christ becomes more apparent in your life and behavior that the world will reject you as well. But this pain also is for your good. It encourages you to cast all your cares on the Lord who cares for you and who has

promised to deliver you from the problems of this world. In this way it builds and firms up your faith. And it also confirms the work the Lord is doing in you, as Peter says, "If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you."

Finally, part of the continuing pain of the labor of bringing to light the child of God within you, is the opposition you will face from your enemy the devil. He "prowls around like a roaring lion," we are told, "seeking someone to devour." And we recall the painful trials he brought upon Job in his attempt to shake him from faith in the Lord. Disasters of nature, attacks from robbers, the death of members of his family, and a terrible skin disease are just a few of the things God allowed Satan to inflict on Job. We too can expect such trials. They are part of God's plan to teach us patience and trust, in order that we learn to humble ourselves under his mighty hand that he may lift up us in his due time.

Growing as a child of God will hurt. We are to expect it. But like motherhood, the joys and rewards are great, as Jesus says in the 16th chapter of John: "Truly, truly, I say to you, you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice. You will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will be turned to joy. When a woman is in labor, she has sorrow because her hour has come, but when she delivers the baby, she no longer remembers the anguish, for joy that a child has been born into the world. So also you have sorrow now, but I will see you again and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you."

So may the Lord give us the grace and strength to face the fiery trials through which he would have us pass, that we may be made perfect in him. "And the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you. To him be the dominion forever and ever. Amen."

Soli Deo Gloria!