

8. St. Anselm, St. Bernard, St. Thomas, St. Julian (and Dante)

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Saint Anselm, Archbishop of Canterbury (1033-1109)

Before developing in the *Proslogion* his ontological argument for the existence of the supreme being, the Benedictine abbot Anselm laid out in his *Monologion* the qualities of that being. Chapter 41, displaying parenthood's influence on metaphysics, argues that "the Supreme Spirit most truly begets, and the Word is most truly begotten." Chapter 42 is more specific about this claim regarding the divine constellation.

Wishing to confirm that the Supreme Spirit is most truly father and the Word most truly his son, Anselm considers whether they are not perhaps mother and/or daughter instead. On the one hand, "spirit" is a masculine noun; but on the other hand "truth" and "wisdom" are feminine nouns. And on the one hand it is characteristic of male animals to be bigger and stronger than the females of the same species; but on the other hand, in some species the reverse is the case. Anselm finds the solution in the observations that "the first and principal cause of offspring is always in the father," and a father's son is more like him than is his daughter.¹

And yet, as Caroline Walker Bynum points out, Anselm envisioned both Paul and Jesus as mothers to Christians such as himself. From one of his prayers:

... You [Paul] are among Christians like a nurse who not only cares for her children but also gives birth to them a second time by the solicitude of her marvelous love. ...

¹ Anselm 1998, p. 55.

Gentle nurse, gentle mother, who are these sons to whom you give birth and nurture if not those whom you bear and educate in the faith of Christ by your teaching? ... For, as that blessed faith is born and nurtured in us by the other apostles also, how much more by you, because you have labored and accomplished more in this than all the others O mother of well known tenderness, may your son feel your heart [*viscera*] of maternal piety. . . .

But you, Jesus, good lord, are you not also a mother? Are you not that mother who, like a hen, collects her chickens under her wings? Truly, master, you are a mother. For what others have conceived and given birth to, they have received from you You are the author, others are the ministers. It is then you, above all, Lord God, who are mother.

Both of you [Paul and Jesus] are therefore mothers For you accomplished, one through the other, and one through himself, that we, born to die, may be reborn to life. Fathers you are then by result, mothers by affection; fathers by authority, mothers by kindness; fathers by protection, mothers by compassion. You [Lord] are a mother and you [Paul] are also. Unequal by extent of love, you do not differ in quality of love You have given birth to me when you made me a Christian, ... you [Lord] by the teaching coming from you and you [Paul] by the teaching he inspires in you. . . .

Paul, mother, ... lay then your dead son [i.e., the sinful soul] at the feet of Christ, your mother, for he is her son. Or rather throw him into the bosom [sinus] of Christ's love, for Christ is even more his mother. Pray that he may revive this dead son, not so much yours as his. Do, mother of my soul, what the mother of my flesh would do

And you also, soul, dead by yourself, run under the wings of your mother Jesus and bewail your sorrows under his wings.

Christ, mother, who gathers under your wings your little ones, your dead chick seeks refuge under your wings. For by your gentleness, those who are hurt are comforted; by your perfume, the despairing are reformed. Your warmth resuscitates the dead; your touch justifies sinners Console your chicken, resuscitate your dead one, justify your sinner. May

your injured one be consoled by you; may he who of himself despairs be comforted by you and reformed through you in your complete and unceasing grace. For the consolation of the wretched flows from you, blessed, world without end, Amen.²

Indeed there are brief or elaborate references to Christ or God as mother in the writings of many leading Church Fathers: Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Irenaeus, John Chrysostom, Ambrose, and Augustine,³ and also in the pseudo-acts of Peter and the writings of Cassiodorus, the Venerable Bede, Peter Lombard, Albert the Great, Bonaventure, Aquinas, and Dante, as well as *Piers Plowman* and *The Booke of Margery Kempe*,⁴ and other texts discussed below.

Saint Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153)

Such images were rare in the centuries between the Fathers and Anselm, but the twelfth century saw a revival of mother imagery among the Cistercian abbots (a reformist offshoot of the Benedictines), notably including Bernard of Clairvaux, architect of the Knights Templar. These abbots often used the maternal image not only for Jesus, but also for (male) church prelates and for their own role as abbots, as Bynum discusses in her 1982 book *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages*. In general, she writes, for many writers in the twelfth and the next few centuries, “maternal imagery is a part of a new sense of God, which stresses his creative power, his love, and his presence in the physical body of Christ and in the flesh and blood of the eucharist.”⁵ The twelfth-century Cistercians’ use of maternal imagery had three features largely

² Quoted in Bynum 1982, pp. 113ff.

³ Bynum 1982, p. 126.

⁴ Bradley 1976, p. 26-28, giving a number of relevant quotations.

⁵ Bynum 1982, p. 135.

distinguishing it from that of the Greek or Latin Fathers, contemporary scholastics, or later writers male or female:

[1] Many [human] *male* figures are also referred to as mother, or described as nursing, conceiving, and giving birth. Male figures so described are invariably figures whom both medieval and modern readers would recognize to be authority figures. ...

[2] ... the consistency of sexual stereotypes Gentleness, compassion, tenderness, emotionality and love, nurturing and security are labeled "female" or "maternal"; authority, judgment, command, strictness, and discipline are labeled "male" or "paternal"; instruction, fertility, and engendering are associated with both sexes (either as begetting or as conceiving). ...

[3] To these authors, breasts and nurturing are more frequent images than conceiving or giving birth. ... Conceiving and giving birth, like suckling, are [for these Cistercians] images primarily of return to, union with, or dependence upon God, not images of Christ's sacrifice or of human alienation. ... Thus the most frequent meaning of mother-Jesus to twelfth century Cistercians is compassion, nurturing, and union.⁶

Saint Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274)

Marriage

Thomas is one of the leading contributors among “the hundreds of medieval Catholic theologians, philosophers, and jurists between 1100 and 1500 who wrote on marriage.”⁷ Here I shall summarize John Witte’s report of Thomas’s account of the natural basis of the institution of monogamous permanent

⁶ Bynum 1982, pp. 147-151.

⁷ Witte 2012, p. 78.

marriage, which supplemented his view of marriage as a sacrament channeling God's grace to the family.⁸

Unlike other animals, young humans require the support of two parents for many years at the beginning of their lives. Even in animals where two parents are needed for a year, an "inclination to stay and help with the feeding, protection and teaching of the offspring is 'naturally implanted in the male.'" The inclination is more lasting in humans because the support of both parents is needed for much longer; it is appropriate to our nature. And it is required by natural justice, in the interest of the child.

The father's inclination is to support his *own* children, and his certainty requires the mother's monogamy and sexual faithfulness, so our instinct requires those things.

This paternal inclination by itself must compete with the strong male inclination to have sex with many women. The latter inclination can be overcome in rational men by (a) their recognition that their own offspring are extensions of themselves, so that care for the children is like care for their own bodies; (b) the natural development of concern for and enjoyment of a child in one's continuing care; and (c) the concomitant deepening of his physical and loving relationship with the mother.

Further, polygyny violates natural justice because it is unfair to wives. It betrays "the requirement of mutuality and equality" and undercuts the mutual devotion and friendship that should exist between parents who remain together. Witte quotes Thomas:

So, if it is not lawful for the wife to have several husbands, since this is contrary to the certainty as to offspring, it would be not lawful, on the other hand, for a man to have several wives, for the friendship of husband and wife would not be free, but somewhat servile. And

⁸ Witte 2012, pp. 83-87.

this argument is corroborated by experience, for among husbands having plural wives, the wives have a status like that of servants.

Extramarital sex is unfair to the likely consequent children, and permitting unilateral divorce (typically by a man) is unfair to women, who would have lost their youthful attractiveness and lost parents (to death) upon which they might otherwise have relied.

Fatherhood and filial piety

In the *Summa Theologiae*, Thomas uses fatherhood as a model in theology (though he would not put the point that way):

The proper name of any person signifies that whereby the person is distinguished from all other persons. ... Now it is paternity which distinguishes the person of [God] the Father from all other persons. Hence this name "Father," whereby paternity is signified, is the proper name of the person of the Father.⁹

and in cosmology:

The perfect idea of paternity and filiation is to be found in God the Father, and in God the Son ... But in the creature, filiation is found in relation to God, not in a perfect manner, since the Creator and the creature have not the same nature; but by way of a certain likeness, which is the more perfect the nearer we approach to the true idea of filiation. For God is called the Father of some creatures, by reason only of a trace, for instance of irrational creatures, according to Job 38:28: "Who is the father of the rain? or who begat the drops of dew?" Of some, namely, the rational creature (He is the Father), by reason of the likeness of His image,

⁹ I, Q. 33, Art. 2, co.; Aquinas 1947, p. 391.

according to Deuteronomy 32:6: "Is He not thy Father, who possessed, and made, and created thee?"¹⁰

and, as Lee Yearley has pointed out,¹¹ in basic moral psychology:

If a man turn to God and adhere to Him, through fear of punishment, it will be servile fear; but if it be on account of fear of committing a fault, it will be filial fear, for it becomes a child to fear offending its father.¹² ...

The relation of servant to master is based on the power which the master exercises over the servant; whereas, on the contrary, the relation of a son to his father or of a wife to her husband is based on the son's affection towards his father to whom he submits himself, or on the wife's affection towards her husband to whom she binds herself in the union of love. Hence filial and chaste fear amount to the same, because by the love of charity God becomes our Father, according to Rom. 8:15, "You have received the spirit of adoption of sons, whereby we cry: Abba [Father]"; and by this same charity He is called our spouse, according to 2 Cor. 11:2, "I have espoused you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ": whereas servile fear has no connection with these, since it does not include charity in its definition.¹³

Fear is twofold, as stated above (Articles 2 and 4); one is filial fear, whereby a son fears to offend his father or to be separated from him; the other is servile fear, whereby one fears punishment. Now filial fear must needs increase when charity increases, even as an effect increases with the increase of its cause. For the more one loves a man, the more one fears to offend him and to be separated from him. On the other hand servile fear, as regards its servility, is entirely cast out when charity comes¹⁴

¹⁰ I, Q. 33, Art. 3, co.; Aquinas 1947, p. 393.

¹¹ Yearley 1990, p. 140.

¹² II-II, Q. 19, Art. 2, co.; Aquinas 1947, p. 2816.

¹³ II-II, Q. 19, Art. 2, ad. 3; Aquinas 1947, p. 2817.

¹⁴ II-II, Q. 19, Art. 10, co.; Aquinas 1947, p. 2831. We might compare these passages with some comparativists' general account of filial duty "in the Western cultural narrative. While it is probably good to honor one's parents for their own sake, in the end

In the same work, Aquinas offers an analysis of piety (*pietas*), by which he means the service and honor we owe to parents and country, as distinct from the religious worship we owe to God.

Man becomes a debtor to other men in various ways, according to their various excellence and the various benefits received from them. On both counts God holds first place, for He is supremely excellent, and is for us the first principle of being and government. On the second place, the principles of our being and government are our parents and our country, that have given us birth and nourishment. Consequently man is debtor chiefly to his parents and his country, after God. Wherefore just as it belongs to religion to give worship to God, so does it belong to piety, in the second place, to give worship to one's parents and one's country. The worship due to our parents includes the worship given to all our kindred, since our kinsfolk are those who descend from the same parents, according to the Philosopher (*Ethic.* viii, 12). The worship given to our country includes homage to all our fellow-citizens and to all the friends of our country. Therefore piety extends chiefly to these.¹⁵ ...

We owe something to our parents in two ways: that is to say, both essentially, and accidentally. We owe them essentially that which is due to a father as such: and since he is his son's superior through being the principle of his being, the latter owes him reverence and service. Accidentally, that is due to a father, which it befits him to receive in respect of something accidental to him, for instance, if he be ill, it is fitting that his children should visit him and see to his cure; if he be poor, it is fitting that they should support him; and so on in like instance, all of which come under the head of service due. Hence Tully [Cicero] says (*De Invent. Rhet.* ii) that "piety gives both duty and homage": "duty" referring to service, and "homage" to reverence or honor, because, as Augustine says (*De Civ. Dei*

we are to do so because God the (transcendental) Father told us to, and He will punish us if we do not" (Rosemont & Ames 2009, p. 33).

¹⁵ II-II, Q. 101, Art. 1, co.; Aquinas 1947, p. 3706.

x), "we are said to give homage to those whose memory or presence we honor."¹⁶ ...

Religion and piety are two virtues. Now no virtue is opposed to another virtue, since according to the Philosopher, in his book on the *Categories* (*Cap. De oppos.*), "good is not opposed to good." Therefore it is impossible that religion and piety mutually hinder one another, so that the act of one be excluded by the act of the other. Now, as stated above (I-II:07:2; I-II:18:3), the act of every virtue is limited by the circumstances due thereto, and if it overstep them it will be an act no longer of virtue but of vice. Hence it belongs to piety to pay duty and homage to one's parents according to the due mode.¹⁷

Or as a fictional daughter later put it, "according to my bond, no more, no less."

Dante Alighieri (c. 1265-1321)

Here I offer just a brief quotation from a recent academic interpreter, whose opinion I am in no position to evaluate, though the book was well received.

Brotherhood forms the basis of the spiritual community sought in the *Purgatorio*. ... If brotherhood is part of the prevalent spiritual condition of Purgatory, then fatherhood reigns supreme in the *Paradiso*. We come here to the essential question of Dante's poem, the question that must be asked because of its larger cultural importance. Why does Dante consider the world of the Father to be superior to the world where brotherhood prevails? The issues of fatherhood *versus* brotherhood would become crucial to the development of Western thought and society. They remain with us, potent, perturbing, and in many ways unresolvable.¹⁸

¹⁶ II-II, Q. 101, Art. 2, co.; Aquinas 1947, p. 3708.

¹⁷ II-II, Q. 101, Art. 4, co.; Aquinas 1947, p. 3710. For more on Aquinas' view of filial piety, see Blustein 1982, pp. 56-62.

¹⁸ Quinones 1994, p. 4

Saint Julian of Norwich (1342-c.1416)

The first English-language book by a woman was by Julian of Norwich, based on a set of mystical visions she had during an illness in 1373. The visions prompted her to become an anchorite: to live out her life shut up in a cell in a church in the center of town, where she wrote up her visions and gave counsel through a small window. Well-known in her lifetime, she has come to be held in high regard by Christian thinkers, and is popularly seen as an apostle of optimism. What strikes me in Julian is her emphasis on family-like plurality in unity, associated especially with the Holy Trinity. Here are a few excerpts from her long family-based discussions of the divine.

And thus I saw that God rejoiceth that He is our Father, and God rejoiceth that He is our Mother, and God rejoiceth that He is our Very Spouse and our soul is His loved Wife. And Christ rejoiceth that He is our Brother, and Jesus rejoiceth that He is our Saviour. These are five high joys, as I understand, in which He willeth that we enjoy; Him praising, Him thanking, Him loving, Him endlessly blessing.¹⁹

For the Almighty Truth of the Trinity is our Father: for He made us and keepeth us in Him; and the deep Wisdom of the Trinity is our Mother, in Whom we are all enclosed; the high Goodness of the Trinity is our Lord, and in Him we are enclosed, and He in us.²⁰

This fair lovely word *Mother*, it is so sweet and so close in Nature of itself²²⁰ that it may not verily be said of none but of *Him*; and to her that is very Mother of Him and of all. To the property of Motherhood belongeth natural love, wisdom, and knowing; and it is good: for though it be so that our bodily forthbringing be but little, low, and simple in regard of our

¹⁹ Julian 1901, p. 109.

²⁰ Julian 1901, p. 114.

spiritual forthbringing, yet it is He that doeth it in the creatures by whom that it is done. The Kindly, loving Mother that witteth and knoweth the need of her child, she keepeth it full tenderly, as the nature and condition of Motherhood will. And as it waxeth in age, she changeth her working, but not her love. And when it is waxen of more age, she suffereth that it be beaten in breaking down of vices, to make the child receive virtues and graces. This working, with all that be fair and good, our Lord doeth it in them by whom it is done: thus He is our Mother in Nature by the working of Grace in the lower part for love of the higher part. And He willeth that we know this: for He will have all our love fastened to Him. And in this I saw that all our duty that we owe, by God's bidding, to Fatherhood and Motherhood, for [reason of] God's Fatherhood and Motherhood is fulfilled in true loving of God; which blessed love Christ worketh in us. And this was shewed in all [the Revelations] and especially in the high plenteous words where He saith: *It is I that thou lovest.*²¹

²¹ Julian 1901, p. 128

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