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Book Review

The Church as Woman and Mother: Historical and Theological Foundations

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The Church as Woman and Mother:
Historical and Theological Foundations
By: **Cristina Lledo Gomez**

Publisher: Paulist Press (New York, New York, U.S.A.)

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John Calvin, in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, describes the visible church thus:

... let us learn even from the simple title “mother” how useful, indeed how necessary, it is that we should know [the church]. For there is no other way to enter into life unless this mother conceive us in her womb, give us birth, nourish us at her breast, and lastly, unless she keep us under her care and guidance until, putting off mortal flesh, we become like the angels. (*Institutes* IV.1.4)

Calvin, of course, did not pull the church’s title of “mother” out of thin air. A keen student of patristic theologians, he was aware that this reference was one in a long line of theological ancestors who have reflected on the metaphor. But Christina Lledo Gomez’s experience in Rome, where leading theologians and priests have asked her why the church is called a mother, suggests that this corner of church tradition does not occupy the forefront of many a theologian’s or priest’s mind, both in the Roman and Protestant Churches. (xvii) Hence, Gomez’s book is necessary to shine a theological and historical light on this often-misunderstood corner of ecclesiology.

The Church as Woman and Mother unfolds the rich history and theology of church as mother and woman in six chapters. The first excavates the biblical and early patristic foundations of deploying female metaphors of the church, paying attention to how female and maternal metaphors described ancient cities outside the Judeo-Christian traditions.

More importantly, however, are the diversity of images that such metaphors conjured up in describing the church beyond simply being connected to the figure of Mary. Irenaeus, for instance, used female and maternal metaphors to illustrate how the church is an intercessor-martyr for those seeking salvation, a true partner of God representing redemption and communion, a breastfeeding mother as the source of orthodox truth, and a bride and virgin representing intimacy between God and God's people. (28) In the second chapter, Gomez focuses on Tertullian's extension of Irenaeus' metaphors in conversation with his own culture, rejecting the image of the woman as the self-indulgent Roman *matrona* while elevating the image of the woman as a virtuous *materfamilias-univira*. (52) The third chapter focuses on Cyprian's deployment of the mother to illustrate the church's unity and stability that reflected the image of the ideal Roman woman. Cyprian would later focus on the mother-bride/sister-bride images from the Songs of Solomon in response to the controversy on baptisms. (175)

It would be in Ambrose's thought (chapter 4) that Mary becomes portrayed as a model to the virgin mother church. While his keenness for having ecclesial virgins in the church may be elicit anachronistic suggestions today, in his time it was rooted in Roman culture. The virtuousness of the church's virgins not only respected women in the church, but also stood in stark contrast to the vestal virgins whose virtuous characters were questionable, at best. Additionally, the maternal metaphor conveyed the church as the site in which the individual soul would mature spiritually. Ambrose's student, Augustine of Hippo (chapter 5) would extend that image to include the spiritual maturity of the church community. His engagements with the *materfamilias-univira* and other images draws not only from Roman culture, of which he is unabashedly a part of, but also from his debates against the Donatists, Manichaeans, Pelagians, and Jovinianists, as well as his memory of his mother, Monica. But it was Augustine's image of Mary that would be particularly influential as "the perception of Mary as virgin and mother collapsed in the tradition of the church as a virgin and mother," and has become the primary symbol of those ecclesial attributes. (178) Gomez concludes the book with an assessment of Pope Francis's engagement with the metaphors, recognizing

that his use of the female and maternal metaphors for the church were rooted in his personal relationships with women both before and during his priestly ministry. Yet, his respect for women contrasts with his dismissive comments on women at various times, reminding the church—Catholic and Protestant—that it still has a ways to go when it comes to full inclusion of women as constitutive members of the church.

Certainly, *The Church as Woman and Mother* is not merely an introduction to *matris ecclesiae* as an ecclesiological metaphor. Gomez's book traces with detail and precision the biblical and patristic development of that image in more detail than this review can elucidate. But as she navigates its complex history, she situates those developments within how motherhood was understood in their historical contexts. Weaving these biblical and historical strands together, Gomez calls for a careful treatment in metaphorizing the church as mother. As she rightly argues, engagements with the *matris ecclesiae* often rely on a "Good Mother/Good Woman" trope that, when superficially understood, can insidiously normalize the dehumanization of women in the church. Her proposal, then, is to engage the metaphor responsibly by engaging the real and concrete lives of women and mothers. Her work successfully does that historically and invites us to do the same in metaphorizing the church in maternal or female terms today.

Gomez's book is a serious contribution not just to Roman Catholic ecclesiology or theology, but to ministry as well. Shining a light on the concrete experiences of women and motherhood as the ground of reflecting on the church enables us to interrogate patriarchal assumptions about womanhood and motherhood. But more generally, Gomez's book also reminds readers that how Christians image the church reveals their own assumptions and biases that make authentic ministry possible. In our contemporary context where churches are quickly losing their dominant social and political influence, but in some cases in the popular imagination, churches have become a visible embodiment of institutional injustice, abject corruption, and incredible hypocrisy, this self-interrogation in light of an honest excavation of church history in their historical contexts is an important skill to master. Gomez presents an excellent demonstration of just that skill.

Henry S. Kuo is visiting assistant professor of theology and ethics at Greensboro College and Research Justice in the Intersections fellow at Mills College. He was the founding editor of the Berkeley Journal of Religion and Theology.