The Church as “mother” has long characterized the Catholic tradition’s ecclesiological self-understanding. Emerging from a scriptural inheritance which imaged the Church as bride, ecclesial language gradually assumed a distinctive female, and then maternal, quality. By the third century, the metaphor of a “mother” Church was already surfacing in dominant theological discourse. Cyprian of Carthage, for example, asserts, “You cannot have God as your Father unless you have the Church for your Mother.” Paulinus of Nola describes a Church that “receives the seed of the eternal Word, carries the peoples in her womb and gives birth to them.” Such figures contributed to a developing theological tradition in which the metaphor of motherhood formatively shaped the Church’s self-understanding.

Centuries later, maternal descriptors for the Church continue to be employed. In Gaudium et Spes, the Second Vatican Council embraces a Spirit-led “Mother Church” openly engaged with the modern world (GS, 43). Similar language also appears in the Council’s writings on liturgical reform and the Church’s relationship with the People of God (SC, 1; LG, 9-17). Still today, the metaphor of “mother” persists in post-conciliar ecclesiology. More recently, Pope Francis’ Evangelii Gaudium celebrates the Church as a “mother with an open heart” (EG, V). These examples are but a few which point to a Catholic ecclesiological inheritance steeped in maternal presence.

Despite this rich history, extended theological reflection on the metaphor of “mother Church” remains intermittent, even largely absent. This absence occurs, notably, in the scant attention given to the actual journey into motherhood itself. Whether as physical labor and/or psycho-spiritual unfolding, the birthing process involved in motherhood remains an untapped, yet powerful, resource for Catholic ecclesiology. The following paper attempts to offer a preliminary exploration of the journey into motherhood and its implications for the mother Church metaphor. Employing a feminist hermeneutic, it broadly examines the ecclesiological implications of the Church as “birthing mother.” And while certain limits of this ecclesiology will be uncovered, unique possibilities also emerge for envisioning her mission.

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2 The image of a bride and bridegroom has been traditionally interpreted as the wedding of Christ and the Church. Cf. Mark 2:19, 2 Corinthians 11:2-4, or Ephesians 5:22-33 (New Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition).
3 St. Cyprian, De Ecclesiae Catholicae Unitate 6: CCL 3, 253: “Habere iam non potest Deum patrem qui ecclesiam non habet matrem.”
4 St. Paulinus of Nola, Carmen 25, 171-172; CSEL 30, 243: “Inde monet mæter aeterni semine verbi / concipiens populos et pariter pariens.”
6 Theological reflection on the feminine in Christian tradition has often emerged in a highly spiritualized form largely divorced from the embodied female experience. This split likely contributed to the lack of attention given to the birthing process involved in motherhood, as the topic demands a conscious healing of this dualism. For further exploration of this split, see: Rosemary Radford Ruether, “Mariology as Symbolic Ecclesiology: Repression or Liberation?,” Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983).
An Overview of the Church’s Mission

As theological discourse increasingly adopted language for the Church as “mother,” this development opened new opportunities for articulating her mission. When examining the birthing mother Church, in particular, the Church’s mission becomes no less than the labor to deliver Christ in the world. Pregnant with her mission—the Christ—she has quickened already with the fullness of truth. Her flesh, then, is sacrament. As a “visible form of invisible grace,” her body constitutes the tabernacle from within which Christ emerges on Earth. Like Mary, this birthing mother is also the Theotokos—full and yet empty. In an utterly physical way, the cries and tears and blood of a laboring Church initiate her kenotic self-emptying for the Christ.

Additionally, the woman in labor is paschal; her contractions ebb and flow in a Spirit-led cycle of surrender and renewal. Just as the pregnant woman offers her body in a “paschal manner” for the life of her child, so too does the Church offer herself as a vessel through which to “bring into being the liberating love of God, manifested in Christ.” Such is her mission. Essentially kerygmatic, this mission—indeed, the mother’s laboring flesh itself—heralds the Christ child. In her proclamation, the woman’s laboring functions as a compelling locus for congregational gathering11 and invites a renewed understanding of what it means to gather as ekklesia.

This mission powerfully embodies the dynamic ecclesiological vision of the Second Vatican Council. In contrast to static, classicist interpretations of the Church as a “perfect society,”12 the image of a birthing mother reflects a post-conciliar view of that gradual, organic journey along which the Church’s mission unfolds. Uniquely connected to a “pilgrim” ecclesiology, the Church-in-labor similarly emphasizes an ongoing movement towards the “fullness of divine truth.” This fullness, however, cannot simply be contained in “dogmatic proposition[s]” or collections of information to be memorized by the faithful. Divine revelation is not limited to propositional statements; it breaks out of human language and is animated into life through relationships of mutuality and self-gift—those qualities of an essentially Trinitarian relationship. Here, by the power of the Spirit, revelation pours from the Creator and into a child. It cries. The child cries to be nurtured, to be nursed, and to be loved and encountered with one’s total being. The fleshy, primal connotations of this Trinitarian character of revelation guard against an “unhealthy divinization” of the Church. Revelation cannot be abstracted away from this human life; always incarnate, it must be encountered in flesh and bone. At its core, this encounter supports and further develops the “dialogic” view of Sacrament recovered by the Council. As a conceiving and laboring woman, the Church answers the call to both offer and receive God’s dynamic self-gift of Love.

Fulfilling the Mission: The Labor Pangs of a Birthing Mother

Any ecclesiology of the Church as birthing mother must carefully attend to the pain of the labor demanded by her mission. Indeed, the fullness of Christ can only emerge after the protracted “pain of childbirth” subsides.

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7 Council of Trent, Roman Catechism (1566), part II.
8 Philippians 2:7.
9 Oscar Romero, “The Easter Church, First Pastoral Letter” (1977), no. 5.
12 Leo XIII, Immortale Dei (1885), no. 27.
13 Dei Verbum, no. 7, 8.
15 Gaillardetz, Authority, 3-6.
16 Dulles, Models, 47.
17 Dulles, Models, 59.
18 Galatians 4:19-31.
Far from signaling cause for alarm or despair, the pangs of labor actually indicate the woman’s conversion to a new identity. Although she mothered the child in her womb, she now prepares to mother that child delivered in and for the world. In the Church, the “pain of childbirth” is experienced at both an individual and collective level. The realization of her mission demands that full attention be given to both.

**Birthing Pangs of the Individual Faithful**

Christ emerges from the Church insofar as the Word is birthed within the hearts and minds of her people. Her labor pangs reverberate within their joy and grief, love and suffering; Christ quickens in the fleshy messiness of human life. Such quickening serves as invitation too; Christ is drawing each person into a lifelong journey of interior conversion. While graced, the labor entailed by this journey can prove tremendously challenging and painful. Beyond creedal assent or doctrinal orthodoxy, this labor challenges the faithful to release their individual egoic identities for union in Christ. As Paul testifies, “it is no longer I, but it is Christ who lives in me.”

Such dying, then, is birthing too—a mysterious, paschal labor stretching from our own mother’s womb to our rebirth in baptismal waters and beyond. A Church-in-labor thus needs midwives. She needs people attending to her birthing, ministers coaxing forth the Word in one another. Here, at the birthing bed, the Church’s mission—Christ—emerges in the world. Ultimately, the Church is delivered from her pangs by those individuals with courage enough to welcome the Word that becomes flesh both within and beyond them.

**Birthing Pangs of the World**

The labor of interior conversion constitutes one dimension of the Church’s mission. Such labor, however, is not solitary; consciously or not, the individual’s journey is interwoven with the hopes and dreams and suffering of a collective humanity. The birthing pangs which reverberate through a single life also expand across families, cultures, nations, even the cosmos itself. A birthing mother Church must humbly claim the tremendous scope of labor ahead. Lifting her own groans in solidarity with the cries of a vast creation, she labors towards justice, mercy, and the “irruption” of God’s Kingdom on Earth. The Church’s offering of and with the world transforms her into that “living sacrifice” gifted by God through Christ.

At the birthing bed, the individual faithful surrender their egoic identity to midwife Christ’s presence in themselves and one another. Here, too, communities are also in labor. Their pangs signal the dismantling of all structures which breed injustice, separation, and alienation from God, self, and neighbor. These structures of sin exist both within and beyond the Church; the full emergence of Christ demands a radical conversion of both.

In a sense, such conversion is also “inversion”—the reordering of injustice and concern for the poor as an essential condition of gospel fidelity. In a unique way, this “preferential option” must consciously extend not only to tapeinos within society, but also to those marginalized within the Church community. Indeed, the Church too is sinful; in order to awaken “justice in the world the church itself must first be just.”

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21 Cf. Jeremiah 22:23, Micah 4:10, Romans 8:22-23
22 Gustavo Gutierrez, “The Option for the Poor Arises from Faith in Christ,” Theological Studies 70 (2009), 319.
23 Romans 12:1.
24 Term used by Gustavo Gutierrez in God of Life, applied in James B. Nickoloff, “Church of the Poor: The Ecclesiology of Gustavo Gutierrez” Theological Studies 54 (1993), 534.
26 The Greek term meaning “lowly,” is being used in the sense of being humiliated or oppressed, and is applied to Mary in the Lukan infancy narrative. Cf. Gustavo Gutierrez, God of Life (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1991), 180.
demands no less, regardless of “how uncomfortable that might be, or how much loss of face it might entail.”

Thus, the birthing pangs which precipitate Christ’s Presence on Earth uniquely include the struggles of women, single mothers, divorcees, the LGBTQ community and all others who seek full dignity in the eyes of the Institutional Church. The very intensity of our contemporary debates on these topics illustrates the scope and depth of the labor gripping our Church today.

And so, Mother Church labors, heavy with the Christ child. Her contractions permeate the lives of her individual faithful. As “the Word of God emerges within the whole Church,” these pangs expand into the fabric of the people’s collective identities. In this labor and countless more, the Church’s mission is fulfilled insofar as the people of God awaken to this call and claim their inheritance as co-creators of God’s Kingdom.

**Fulfillment of the Mission: The Birth of the Christ**

When will the “pain of childbirth” subside? When will the Church’s labor be complete? Even as “the whole creation has been groaning” in anticipation of the Christ, Paul maintains that, ultimately, no one can predict how long the birthing pangs may endure. The Parousia will arrive at an unexpected time, similar to the moment in which those first “labor pains come upon a pregnant woman.”

The “new creation” stirs in darkness. And yet, even amidst the throes of labor, the people of God sense the profound joy yet to come. Within this eschatological tension, water breaks. The Church lies arched out between the birthing and the birth; she cannot remain silent. The flesh of a birthing mother proclaims the vision, even as it stirs within her. Ultimately, she must have courage enough to embrace its fulfillment not only in the delivery of a child, but also in the transformation of her own identity.

**Transformation of the Mother: A Liberated Church**

Indeed, while pregnancy and labor culminate in the birthing of a child, they also herald the transformation of the birthing woman—and of the Church. Such transformation unfolds as the Church’s labor pangs draw her to make “that word her own in her faith and in her body.” Similar to the Lukan Mary, this free choice embraces all the messiness and unpredictability of childbirth. In this, the laboring woman claims renewed meaning for herself, becoming a prophetic denunciation of traditional “dualisms of carnal femaleness and spiritual femininity.”

A birthing mother Church first denounces and then heals these dualisms. While this healing can assume a variety of forms, it would undoubtedly entail the cultivation of a “more incisive female presence” in the Church’s leadership structure and an increased attentiveness to inclusive language in worship. At its core, such healing reflects the Church’s liberation from the humiliation of the “patriarchal feminine” and the offering of her body as a “community which is itself a sign of transformation” today.

30 One such example of how this labor can be found in a peoples’ collective identity is evident in the ways human communities are now grappling to reorient their relationship with the Earth in light of environmental devastation.
31 Galatians 4:19.
32 Romans 8:22.
33 1 Thessalonians 5:3.
34 2 Corinthians 5:17.
35 Gutierrez, “Holy is God’s Name,” 174.
37 Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 152.
This community remembers its birth narrative. It knows that the emergence of the Christ child is only realized in a fundamentally co-centric manner. Each aspect of her physicality uniquely contributes to the realization of her mission. As her very body provides the visible structure for birthing the Christ, so too must the Church be structured. Honoring the organic, tidal and dynamic rhythms of the laboring woman, a birthing mother Church can outgrow the “exaggerated institutionalism” to which she has often been prone. The need for such growth has emerged as a timely theme in Pope Francis’ papacy, particularly as he decried many of the “diseases” born of such institutionalism in his 2014 pre-Christmas meeting with the Roman Curia. Ultimately, such diseases stand as an impediment to the Gospel and to the Vatican II Council’s commitment to open engagement with the broader world.

In the transformation experienced by the mother Church, one can recognize certain liberatory impulses already present within the Church today. Bearing the inclusive mark of Archbishop Oscar Romero’s “Easter Church,” one such impulse can be found in the gradual emergence of an “alternative Christianity.” This alternative Christianity stands in creative tension alongside the institutional Church, prophetically engaging her to heal those wounds wrought by the patriarchal feminine. In part, this prophetic engagement may involve the formation of “feminist base communities” that autonomously form out of a commitment to seeking freedom from sexism and other forms of oppression. And while the transformation of the mother Church can undoubtedly be nurtured in a variety of ways, the collective impact of any renewed Christian witness must ultimately catalyze the Church’s transformation at every level of her self-understanding.

Without doubt, many possibilities still lie in the darkened womb. Until the cries of the promised child rise across the world, the birthing pangs continue. The woman labors at the birthing bed. The Church awakens to a deepening sense of her own identity and mission.

Horizons of Further Exploration

While imaging the Church as a birthing mother opens unique possibilities for understanding its mission, potential limitations must be also addressed. One such limit lies in how this image informs the feminine in Catholic tradition. While an ecclesiology of a laboring Church may catalyze a renewed valuation of female presence, such valuation cannot remain shackled to a woman’s sole identity as mother. Mothers embody a multiplicity of identities in the world. Furthermore, not all women sense a call to motherhood, and motherhood itself is by no means limited to the biological kind. Thus, any valuation of the feminine in Catholic tradition must seriously grapple with the inherent complexity of “the feminine” itself. Imaging the Church as a birthing mother, or any other use of maternal language, ought to constitute one component of the tradition’s emerging feminist consciousness.

Other possible drawbacks exist. For example, focusing on a mother’s experience of joyful delivery fails to account for women whose pregnancy ends in the grief of miscarriage. Those who suffer the violence of rape or experience an unplanned pregnancy may also offer vastly different stories, as does each woman herself. An ecclesiology of childbirth needs to ensure that no single narrative is lauded as either normative or prescriptive. And while the image may enrich the symbolic tradition of a female Church, it could also inhibit the development

41 Consider this model in distinction to the church as “pyramidal hierarchy” in Edward Schillebeeckx, Church: The Human Story of God (New York: Crossroad, 1991), 198-199. He explores the Vatican II Council’s shift towards recognizing the “co-responsibility of all believers” on pages 207-213.
42 Compare with Paul’s description of the community in 1 Corinthians 12:4-31.
43 Dulles, Models, 36.
44 Pope Francis, Presentation of Christmas Greetings to the Roman Curia, December 2014.
45 Cf. Romero, “The Easter Church.”
46 Cf. Ruether, Sexism and God-Talk, 195.
47 Cf. Ruether, Sexism and God-Talk, 205.
of other gendered ecclesiologies. Finally, the image must be held in tension with the traditional wedding of a female Church to a male Christ. Insofar as the tradition predominates, women’s ongoing struggle to fully claim and celebrate themselves in Christ’s image may likewise be inhibited. These concerns bear serious implications for contemporary theology and ministry. As such, they demand careful thought and exploration.

Certain possibilities of a birthing ecclesiology also remain unconsidered. Notable is how the “birthing process” has thus far been examined in light of a mother’s physical labor. And yet, both women and men usher new life into the world through other forms of birthing. Innumerable creative processes manifest the Christ; each demands both respect and inclusion. Further consideration also needs to be given to the implications this model holds for the Church’s relationship with a pluralistic global community. An ecclesiology of a Church-in-labor should be adopted only insofar as it nourishes open, humble engagement with the broader world, particularly in the realm of interfaith dialogue.

Still, the metaphor remains inexhaustible. While other considerations remain, the concerns and possibilities named above are among those which merit committed theological reflection.

**Conclusion**

Without a doubt, envisioning the Church as a woman in labor presents it with a daunting mission in the world. While the Church’s call to form and birth the Christ finds grounding in post-conciliar ecclesiology, it also presses for a significant reexamination of the Church’s identity, particularly its valuation of the feminine. For a contemporary Catholic community still immersed in the throes of the birthing process, the image of the Church as a woman in labor offers itself as a vision of hope. Indeed, we can trust that our birthing pangs emerge from our struggle for justice; far from impeding progress, they actually point to the slow realization of the Church’s mission. These labor pangs serve as a “foreshadowing of the new age”—a new age whose form we may briefly glimpse, yet whose fullness remains obscured. Following the witness of our own mothers, we pray for the courage to labor with steadfast resolve, driven by the promise of new life.

“In gratitude to professor James B. Nickoloff whose teaching and guidance empowered my search for a liberating ecclesiology.”

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