

MOTHER OF PERPETUAL HELP – Kevin O Shea.
Some random thoughts from psychology and philosophy
Not about the icon, but about the title

MOTHER

The mother is very much the infant's **world**. It is a world personalised for the baby by the mother's physical presence, her nourishing presence, her caring-to-excess presence. Her loving is the source of humanity – amazing, but true.

HOME

The **mother** is primordial. She is there before our history begins. She cannot be forgotten like someone we meet later in our story. [Later there will be stages of development of the child in a meeting of needs and in the performance of functions. But we are looking here at something much earlier and much deeper.]

From the mother, there will be **caring**. It comes from her in an **excess**. Whenever in later life there are instances of real caring, that sort of excess is there too. That accompanies the adult gestures of care. [This is why true care is hard to understand – and seldom analysed.] It is care in excess. It is a **caress**. From this there comes an **excitation** and it remains unquenchable. A **seduction** takes place. The mother seduces the child into this union. In a way, too, you could say that the child seduces the mother into it!

There is what we call a maternal 'ambience'. Literally it means a neighbourhood (Chora). Plato (Timaeus) called it the wet-nurse of Becoming. It is more an **atmosphere** or **climate** than an activity done by someone.

It is there in the sound of the mother's '**voice**'. It is the raw material for language, when language comes, later. It is shared by mother and infant. It is imitated by the child. It amounts to a sort of secret between them. There are rhythmic elements in it. They are echoes exchanged between them. They are affect laden. They are babblings, coming from a capacity to play with the phonemic scale with its emotional sonorities. Both infant and mother develop it, together. It includes touch and voice, holding and voicing, forming a sonorous envelope that addresses and saturates the infant in excess of any one particular thing that it might signify. It is a sonorous body inhabited by the two of them. The child doesn't waste its child time in trying to signify something! Proust said that ideas are substitutes for sorrows, but I wonder if they are also distractions from the mother-child play? Not as two 'adults' playing adult-defined roles, but as mutual beings in this deeper wave-length...

This symbiotic something – this meaningful thing that is happening in months and months of 'meaningless' noises. The process seems duplicated in a life long relationship between ourselves and the mother of God... It is all in the sound of the mother's voice...Reliance is in the resonance....

It is not right to identify this as a collection of rhythmic or melodic sounds that are poor, yet to be developed words and expressions. They are expressions of the maternal-infantile bond, but it is **something much more** than all that. It is larger than the actual mother and actual child. It is big..

Hopkins has grasped this, in The Blessed Virgin Compared to the Air We Breathe. He presents Mary as a transparent ubiquitous atmosphere –

Wild air, world-mothering air
Nestling me everywhere
This needful, never spent,
And nursing element.

He adds that she mothers each new grace, that does now reach our race. There are always New Nazareths, and always New Bethlehems. There is as a result a new self and a nobler me. ...and a nobler you.

World-mothering air, air wild,
Wound with thee, in thee isled,
Fold home, fast fold thy child.

There can be **noise and interference in this music**. This interference can paralyse the infant's capacity to translate and to metabolise the transmission from the mother.

It is none the less the music itself that **makes everything else exciting and seductive**. In and through that music anything and everything else is more than what Winnicott called 'good enough'.

This is the source of what we rightly call humanity. Humanity is born(e) here. By humanity is meant the ability that some people have to offer a home to those who do not have one, or who lack one temporarily. Barthes said that the minimal definition of

humanity, the degree zero of it, is precisely hospitality. **Hospitality** is what the maternal ambience is. The original (Greek) meaning of the word *ethos* is a regular sleeping place or animal shelter.

*THAT IS WHAT WE MEAN WHEN WE SAY MOTHER
MOTHER OF PERPETUAL HELP, BE MOTHER TO ME*

PERPETUAL

Perpetual: it has nothing to do with time, but with quality. Too often perpetual is linked with 'all the time'. How many times? It really hints at 'all the eternity' Once upon eternity...

HEAVEN

The word 'perpetual' and the word 'eternal' go together. I want to think about what '**eternity**' means, what the word '**perpetual**' is saying to us. There is more in them than seems at first sight. They are too often seen in terms of time, time that is very long, time that has no beginning and no end. Time that was there before our time started, and will still be there when our time is over.

Time is something that can be measured. It is so many days, hours, minutes. It is a quantity. There are passages of time, sequences of time. Some people think eternity is just a long time. It isn't.

Eternity – God's eternity – isn't a 'long time' – it is a qualitative thing, deeper than any quantity and any measurement...and always there...'all the time' ...in us. People sometimes imagine eternity as if it were extended time, as if it were before or after our sort of time. It isn't an extension of time at all. It is a qualitatively depth dimension of everything, everyone, every where, every when..... [The German, *immerwährende*, ever-being rather than ever-lasting, says it better...]

That is what we mean when we say 'PERPETUAL'.

Mother of the God who is Eternally deep in me – be Perpetual in me.

How relational is it? Very. There is a contemporary approach to God, as a real gentleness in our lives. God is a depth-Gentleness within us all, within everything.. For many people nowadays there has been a *surprising discovery of God as this kind of Gentleness*. We have moved from an emphasis on a (too) heavy god, to a new emphasis on a Gentle-God. We have moved from an assumption about an Absolute God, to a new feeling for a Relational-God. [It seems to me that some insisrences on a heavy, absolute God are like a twilight or sunset effect of an older cultural experience of God. There is a 'better' and 'more decent' God around now for many people...]

Eternity is a personal thing, eternity is really a person. It is God. God is the real and gentle name of that depth quality within us all. And it does not come and go. It is, deeply, gently, eternal.

That is why it is natural to link it with a Mother....of Eternal Presence to us.

*THAT IS WHAT WE MEAN WHEN WE SAY GENTLE MOTHER
MOTHER SO PRESENT, MOTHER SO GENTLE, MOTHER SO ALWAYS, MOTHER SO EVER,
BE GENTLE TO US ALL*

HELP

There have been various words for what we ask of our Mother of Perpetual Help.. The Latin tradition, and an English one based on it, called it **succour**. But it didn't always sound right to modern ears. The German/Saxon tradition, and another English one based on it, called it **help**. But help can mean lots of things...some of them not so deep.

Succour: Many still prefer it to "help". Help sounds like yelp. Panic. Gimme, or I'll howl.

HELD

Nowadays, we might suggest the word, **CARE OR CARING**. It is a relational thing. It is a healing thing. It does something with the unequal relationship between the carer and the cared for. In the latter it is **trust**. In the former it is **ability and willingness** to do something when asked – or when needed, even if not asked. In a society exposed to risk, in a state of precaution, we need more than palliative care. We need care itself...without any adjective that might limit it.

We are more than GB Shaw's description of a human: "a feverish little clod of ailments and grievances, complaining that the world will not devote itself to making us happy". We ask for something more than pain control. We long for someone who is **just there for us**....someone who is not, and doesn't have, the technical answers to our questions....

Expressions of grief have always been hard to hear. Ancient Greeks called them spontaneous cries or ritualised chants. Jews called them lamentations. In the New Testament, lamentation becomes increasingly out of favour. For first and second century Christians, lamentation becomes a prayer. Providence is larger than anguish. **Prayer is trust.**

Caring, yes, but we could link it with 'perpetual' and say it is **SOLLICITUDE....** It is a response to anxiety... Freud said that anxiety was the only emotion that never lied. Solitude knows that, knows that anxiety is always there...and responds to its often hidden presence.

A carer of that kind would need a special self-confidence to get entrée into the heart of the one needing such care. Such a carer would need an ability to **listen deeply...** to be a listening field in which inadequate signals gain dignity. An ability to understand what it means to be scared.... And to know what makes a scared person talk, and pray, about what scares them?

What do we get when someone comes to our help, with caring sollicitude?

We get perpetual help, perpetual mothering.

MOTHER OF EVERLASTING CARING AND SOLICITUDE, HEAR OUR UNCEASING PRAYER – EVEN BEFORE WE BEGIN TO SAY IT
