

SOLEMNITY OF OUR LADY OF WALSINGHAM 24TH
SEPTEMBER 2016 (Sr Helen Costigane SHCJ)

It is nearly three years since my mother died, and I often reflect on how she helped make me the person that I am today. As the documents of the Second Vatican Council tell us, parents are the first and primary teachers of their children.¹ I often think of the house – the home – where I learned the importance of prayer, practical charity, and accepting people for who they are without being judgemental, dismissive or uncharitable. My mother taught me well – but the blame for any shortcomings I have is mine alone.

Today we celebrate the Solemnity of Our Lady of Walsingham. You are probably familiar with the story of the origins of the shrine, when in 1061 Richeldis de Faverches, a wealthy young widow in the area of Norfolk had a dream. In this, Our Lady took Richeldis in spirit to Nazareth and told her to build a replica of the Holy House there in Walsingham, as a memorial to the Annunciation and, thus, the Incarnation.

The story made me reflect on the role of Mary (not forgetting Joseph) in the upbringing of Jesus. If we believe that Jesus was truly man as well as God, then we have to admit that he was not born knowing all there was to know. He had to develop and mature as a human being. As Hans Urs von Balthasar says:

If we take the incarnation of God's Word seriously, then we have to say that Jesus, like every other human child, learnt slowly and gradually: not only human language and human behaviour, but also the religion of his people.²

¹ Cf *GE*, 3.

² *Homo Creatus Est*, 1986, p. 168f., quoted in John Saward, 'Youthful unto Death: the Spirit of Childhood', in *The Beauty of Christ: An Introduction to the Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar* (Edinburgh, T & T Clark, 1994), pp. 140-160, p. 149

We know that Mary and Joseph were both observant Jews, and that they introduced Jesus to the religion of Israel, above all to its prayers and to Scripture. Von Balthasar goes on to say:

A baby is called to self-consciousness by the love and smile of his mother. It is, in fact, the horizon of infinite Being in its totality which opens up to him in this meeting. It reveals four things to him: (i) that he is one in love with his mother, and yet he is not his mother, and so Being is one; (ii) this love is good, and so the whole of Being is good; (3) that this love is true, and so Being is true, (4) this love is a cause of joy, and so Being is beautiful.³

From his mother the child draws the whole content of metaphysics: Being is beautiful, true and good. If there is any disturbance in relationship (between the parents, or the parent and the child), the horizon of absolute Being will be confused and clouded. Any kind of tension in the sacred living space of the family ‘opens up wounds that usually cannot be healed in the child’s heart’.⁴

I don’t pretend to understand everything Von Balthasar says, but it seems to me that he is suggesting two things: firstly, that the relationship between Mother and Child, Mary and Jesus, was a *bonded* one, and that Mary’s relationship with God, the world, other people, was mediated to Jesus and coloured by her perceptions. This question of ‘bondedness’ is very important in the life of a child. Psychologists tell us that bonding and attachment between a child and mother occurs within the first two years of a baby’s life. If it does not occur, the child will develop mistrust and a deep-seated rage, becoming a child without a conscience, and lacking the ability to form true, loving relationships. For bonding to occur, the mother (and also the

³ *Wenn ihr nicht werdet wie dieses Kind*, p. 14, in Saward, p. 147.

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 15.

father) has to provide a sense of stability and security, love and acceptance.⁵

This affectional bond or attachment, when strong and healthy, can do much more than ensure the child's physical survival.

Attachment, defined as 'an affectionate bond between two individuals that endures through space and time and serves to join them emotionally',⁶ allows the child to develop both trust in others and reliance on himself: '....The bond that a child develops to the person who cares for him in his early years is the foundation for his future psychological development and for his future relationships with others'.⁷ Attachment helps the child to attain his full intellectual potential, develop a conscience, become self-reliant, handle fear and worry, develop future relationships, cope with stress and frustration, and think logically. A lack of attachment can be demonstrated in a lack of the ability to give and receive affection, self-destructive behaviour, a lack of long-term friends, and cruelty to others.⁸ There may also be a sense of remoteness and a distinct lack of obedience towards parents or carers.

The gospel of Luke gives us a glimpse of the bondedness of Jesus in the story when he goes missing and disappears. He is found in the temple talking to the teachers. 'Why have you done this to us?', asks Mary. 'Don't you know that I must be about my Father's business?', Jesus replies. Had this happened in Scotland, he might well have been given a skelp for his cheek. But we are told that he went back to Nazareth with them and lived under their authority. A non-attached child would be unresponsive, uncooperative or lose the plot completely at being curtailed in such a way.

⁵ See K. Magid and C. A. McKelvey, *High Risk: Children Without a Conscience* (New York, Bantam, 1989). Future references abbreviated to *High Risk*.

⁶ John Kennell, in *High Risk*, p. 58.

⁷ Vera Fahlberg, in *High Risk*, p. 59.

⁸ *High Risk*, p. 13.

We know a great deal about the kind of man he grew up to be – a person of great principle who taught with authority, shrewd, with serene self control, a sense of humour, forgiving, empathic, and concerned with the weak, the powerless and the marginalised. How did he get to be that person? What was Mary’s role in this? Bowlby points out ‘that each of us is apt to do to others as we have been done by’.⁹ We don’t know much about the early life of Jesus, but if Bowlby is right, then we can assume that many of the qualities exhibited by Jesus were modelled from Mary.

We can evaluate Mary and Joseph’s role in Jesus’s development as a child, teenager and man from different perspectives. We can look to psychological theories of moral development such as that proposed by Lawrence Kohlberg, who proposed a model of development that ranged from the pre-conventional where behaviour is conditioned by the threat of punishment or the possibility of reward; to the conventional level where there is an acceptance of the need for a social system and the need for law and order; and to the post-conventional stage which is guided by social concern of principles of– the value of human life, human rights, human dignity, human freedom, human responsibility for oneself and toward others)..

How did Mary and Joseph nurture Jesus in such a way that aided his moral development? Firstly, what do we know of Mary and Joseph? Mary, a girl of no status from an insignificant town, displays an openness to God that is truly astonishing (Luke 1:26-38). She is ready to go along with the divine invitation to conceive and bear a son, yet it is not out of a sense of fear but one of deep trust. Her Magnificat tells us of her relationship with a God who is merciful and loving, and on the side of the weak and marginalised (Luke 1:46-55). Though she does not understand what having this

⁹ Bowlby, in *High Risk*, p. 67.

child might mean, her attitude remains one of reflection and prayer, and openness to God.

We know little about Joseph, 'of the House of David', whose father (Matthew tells us) was Jacob (1:16). He was a just man, and on hearing of Mary's pregnancy, was reluctant to make an example of her. He decided to let her go secretly rather than make a public fuss that might have resulted in her being stoned to death. But Joseph has a dream and on awaking, does as the angel of the Lord commanded him. He faithfully and precisely obeys God's instructions. Both Mary and Joseph are portrayed as observant Jews, and from them, Jesus learns the law, customs and traditions of his people.

At this point it is worth looking at the nature of the authority they exhibited as parents, as this is key to the development of the child. At the pre-conventional level, where the attitude to authority is one of competition, challenge or often confusion on the part of the child, assertive supervision is needed by the authority figure. This teaches the child that there ARE boundaries, that there are some things that are not acceptable. However, the style of authority at this stage may seek to contain the child through force, or bribes, or deteriorate to an attitude of rigidity, even tyranny.

At the conventional level, the stage 3 individual starts to develop a sense of discipline. With the primary motive one of being a good team player, the attitude of the child towards authority begins to be one of cooperation and conformity, where unswerving attachment and loyalty are key concepts. The individual at stage 4 understands that he has a part to play in a community. As the principles of autonomy, competence and belonging come to be understood, the assertion of power by the parent can be lessened. Again, the parent may abuse the power they have by causing the child to undertake actions on behalf of the family which others

may find reprehensible. One example of this could be the child forced to shoplift for his family.

At the next two stages, the attitude towards authority is one of collaboration and consensus. Independence is replaced by interdependence. This involves the individual assuming a responsibility for the group, in formulating and implementing the laws which will uphold the common good, while respecting the dignity of the individual at the same time.

What can we say then about the contribution of Mary and Joseph to Jesus's moral development? Firstly, their own maturity and outlook enabled him to move through the levels of development, providing him with an understanding of the role of the law, an appreciation of the community within which he lived, and an understanding of the needs of others as well as his own. While rules would be considered important, these would have been seen in the wider context of a relationship with God, but with a particular understanding of a God of Love and Mercy, rather than a God of Wrath, who favours the weak and powerless, and who is just and faithful.

Secondly, in his early life, the boundaries and sense of security provided through bondedness and attachment would enable him to form close friendships, engage with people and empathise with them, and respect their dignity.

Thirdly, while Mary and Joseph were observers of the law, we can speculate that they were not slavish to the letter of the law, but understood and appreciated the values which it sought to uphold. We can see much of this reflected in Jesus's attitude to the law – it is not ignored or devalued, but completed in his discourse on the greatest commandment of all – love of God, neighbour and self (Mark 12:28-34).

The work of Mary and Joseph comes to fruition when Jesus begins his public ministry, with what might be seen as Mary's final nudge: at the wedding at Cana, when Mary tells points out to Jesus that there is no more wine, he responds, 'What do you want from me? My hour is not yet come'. We can almost hear Mary, Our Lady of the Elbow, imperceptibly nudge her son and say: 'Yes, it has. Get on with it'.

Before I began thinking about this image of the Holy House of Nazareth represented in Walsingham, the contribution that Mary and Joseph made to the man Jesus became, did not really register with me. But Jesus was the person he was because of the people that Mary and Joseph strove to be. I have a card at home featuring two women on the front, one young and one old and it reads: 'However hard you try, you end up like your mother'. Whether we consider our own mothers, or Mary, the mother of Jesus, that's not a bad end.

