Spirituality



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by Sr. Julia Walsh

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I am in a dim hospital room, standing at the foot of the bed, a small video camera gripped in my hands. I am trying to hold the camera steady and silence my sobs while I watch one of the most incredible, beautiful scenes I have ever observed: the entrance of a new child into the world.

The woman birthing this child has asked me to be here and record this sacred moment. Before today, I've accompanied her to several doctor appointments and listened to her talk about her dreams. I am trying to support her through a lot of changes; she is formerly homeless and now a resident at a transitional living program, Tubman House in Sacramento, California, where I am serving as a Jesuit Volunteer.

The year is 2005, and I have recently begun an application to enter the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration based in La Crosse, Wisconsin. Doing so means moving toward a public renouncement of the potential for participation in this common, sacred, feminine experience. Becoming a sister means I will never carry a child in my womb. I am OK with this. It feels surprising to realize I lack the desire to give birth to a child. But that's what I feel.

More surprising for me is the hope that has surfaced in my heart during my discernment — hope that being a sister means I will still be able create, share and give much life.

In the Middle Ages, the idea of spiritual motherhood was quite popular among both women and men. St. Bernard of Clairvaux, a Cistercian, understood his role as abbot to be "Mother." St. Francis of Assisi described himself as a mother to his brothers, and Meister Eckhart wrote, "We are all meant to be mothers of God, for God always needs to be born."

In his *Later Admonition and Exhortation*, a letter to the early members of the Franciscan order, St. Francis of Assisi wrote: "We are spouses when the faithful soul is united by the Holy Spirit to our Lord Jesus Christ. We are brothers, moreover, when we do the will of His Father who is in heaven; mothers when we carry Him in our heart and body through love and a pure and sincere conscience; and give Him birth through a holy activity, which must shine before others by example."

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In other words, we all are called to union with God. We all are made to help God be more present in this world. We do this by living the Gospel, through our actions of service and prayer. Helping others see God's light means birthing God.

This concept of "mystical motherhood" is elaborated on in *Franciscan Prayer* by Franciscan Sr. Ilia Delio. Delio writes: "When love transforms our actions in a way that Christ is 'represented' — then we become mothers, sisters and brothers of Christ. This birthing of Christ in the life of the believer … is a way of conceiving, birthing and bringing Christ to the world in such a way that the Incarnation is renewed. It is making the gospel alive."

During these Advent days — and whenever I am tempted to become discouraged about human and ecological suffering — I tend to play a little game with myself. I make a mental list of all the things that give me hope. I consider how others are helping God's goodness be known, how God is being birthed right now.

This mind game is my own little response to one of my favorite Bible verses: "Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things" (Philippians 4:8).

Each time I make my mental list of signs of hope, many of the same things come to mind. I think of my friends at the White Rose Catholic Worker Farm who inspire me to more boldly love my neighbor with their simple, radical hospitality, living without electricity and the internet. I think of the people entering war zones to do works of mercy and serve the poor, like the members of Voices for Creative Nonviolence. I think of the volunteers for organizations like No More Deaths who hike through the desert to set up water stations for migrants crossing the U.S.-Mexico border. These are the people who continue to push and push, no matter the opposition, who feel the pains of labor but persist in doing good.

Each act of love gives birth to God. Each gesture of selfless sacrifice for the sake of those on the margins helps God's light to burn more brightly.

Encounters from my daily rhythms of Gospel service also come to mind. I see the faces of the eighth-graders I teach at the local parish who are growing more

comfortable with silence and prayer. I think of the kindness of a 4-year-old who holds the hand of his anxious classmate to help calm him. I think of the men I visit at the county jail who are deeply aching to be close to their children and who are kind and encouraging to each other. They are the ones who act with hope, no matter the naysayers.

Their lives proclaim the truth: Every act of goodness helps God be more fully present.

Now that I am a vowed Franciscan sister who is of childbearing age, I remain hopeful that my vocation enables me to me to create, share and give life. I may not physically go through the discomforts of pregnancy and labor, but I experience much of those dynamics when I am working to co-create something good with God, such as a piece of writing or a talk. Through all my creative work, I aim to hold up signs of hope to others. I try to bring light to those who are in the darkness of sorrow and despair and help others see that goodness is winning, God is becoming more present. Far and near, God's people are birthing God.

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