



Mother's Day Observance

by Jonathan Aitken

MILLIONS OF AMERICAN FAMILIES will be celebrating Mother's Day this month with carnations, chocolates, greeting cards, and all the usual paraphernalia of a well-established national holiday.

The date of this annual festivity—the second Sunday in May—was set by an act of Congress in 1914 followed by a proclamation issued by President Woodrow Wilson declaring the first national Mother's Day that year. Politicians have been getting in on the act ever since. As recently as 2008 the U.S. House of Representatives voted twice for a resolution “celebrating the role of mothers in the United States and supporting the goals and ideals of Mother's Day.” The first vote was unanimous so that all congressmen would be on record for supporting motherhood. In that sort of legislative mood it was surprising that the House did not also vote unanimously for apple pie!

Given the secular background of this political schmaltz, it may seem rather unpromising to explore the question, what are the religious roots of Mother's Day? But there are spiritual answers that can be traced back to such sources as the book of the prophet Isaiah; the 19th chapter of St. John's Gospel; the medieval traditions of Catholic Europe; and a Protestant church in Grafton, West Virginia. It's a complicated story that predates Woodrow Wilson by many centuries.

Let's work backward from St. Andrew's Methodist Episcopal Church in Grafton, and a member of its congregation, Anna Marie Jarvis, who is often described as the founder of Mother's Day in the United States. After much prayer she organized a small service on May 12, 1907, to honor her recently deceased

mother, who had taught in the church Sunday school. Anna Marie Jarvis later began campaigning for the day to be recognized as a public holiday, to celebrate the lives of all mothers. This was officially commemorated by the state of West Virginia in 1910, by many other states in the next four years, and turned into a national holiday by the U.S. Congress in 1914.

The only spiritual thread that ran through these events was that they had been started by prayers on a Sunday. There was also a vague connection with the traditions of Mothering Sunday celebrations in other parts of the world, whose origins can be traced back to the foot of the Cross on the first Good Friday.

One of the most moving moments of the Crucifixion story is related in John's gospel, when Jesus looks down from the Cross at his mother:

When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing there he said to his mother, “Woman, here is your son.” Then he said to the disciple, “Here is your mother.” And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home. (John 19: 26-27)

The scene is perhaps the most poignant illustration in Scripture of maternal love, mingling with filial love, blessed by God's love at a time of pain and suffering.

Watching her son die in agony on the Cross must have been a heartbreaking moment for Mary. Jesus could not bear it either. For put in blunt contemporary language the request he was making to his disciple John was “Please get her out of here.” And that

was what John did, taking Mary into his own home from that hour and looking after her as if she were his own mother.

The words from the Cross “Here is your mother” were interpreted by early Christians to establish Mary as the Mother of the Church, a title formally confirmed by Pope Paul VI. The church itself was frequently spoken of as a mother who nourishes and guides her children, hence the term Mother Church, which is thought to derive from a famous passage in the book of Isaiah when the prophet compares ancient Jerusalem to a mother comforting her children (Isaiah 66: 11-13).

This maternal imagery recurs time and again in the writings of medieval mystics. For example, abbots and pastors were urged by the 12th-century monk Bernard of Clairvaux to be mothers to those in their care, showing affection and letting their breasts swell with the milk of encouragement and sympathy. From such ideas there gradually emerged the concept that some large ecclesiastical foundations, particularly the great cathedrals of Europe, were mother churches. Their offspring, which in modern language would be called church plants, became known as daughter churches, often linked by the umbilical chord of funding and by physical proximity.

Gratitude to these mother churches from their daughter churches was the origin of Mothering Sunday, although it began life in the 15th century under the name of *Laetare* Sunday, the Latin word for “to rejoice” or “to be grateful.”

The rejoicings were particularly welcome in the middle of the penitential austerities of Lent. Hungry and thirsty pilgrims who had walked from the daughter churches to their mother cathedrals were allowed a day off from fasting. Cakes and ale were liberally supplied to them, so much so that two alternative names for Mothering Sunday became Refreshment Sunday and Simnel Sunday. The latter referred to the popular simnel cake (a fruit and marzipan confection) that was particularly enjoyed by

children who came on the walk from the daughter church to the mother cathedral, accompanied by their human mothers.

FAR FROM BEING LOST in the mists of time, these traditions have survived into the 21st century. One of the surviving locations is St. Matthew’s Westminster, my own parish church. It is, like several others in this part of London, called a daughter church of the nearby Westminster Abbey. On Mothering Sunday, aka *Laetare*, Refreshment, or Simnel Sunday, the children from our congregation present their mothers with Mother’s Day daffodils at the end of the main service. They then carry a simnel cake round the corner to Westminster Abbey, where they present it to the Dean, head of our mother church, as a mark of prayerful gratitude.

This may seem a long way from Anna Jarvis, the mother of Mother’s Day in America. But the inspiration for her tireless campaign with state politicians and congressmen for the national holiday started from prayer and worship. By the end of her life she so hated the secular commercialization of the holiday that she prayed for a return to its spiritual roots. So she had bittersweet emotions about her creation, possibly compounded by the fact that she had no children of her own.

Yet the reality of motherhood, well reflected in those traditions that go back to the foot of the Cross, is that it can sometimes be a bittersweet journey of maternal pain mingled with joy, gratitude, and celebration. Perhaps these ancient spiritual truths go deeper than the secular artificiality of the modern Mother’s Day. ❀

Jonathan Aitken is most recently author of *Nazarbayev and the Making of Kazakhstan: From Communism to Capitalism (Continuum)*. His biographies include *John Newton: From Disgrace to Amazing Grace (Crossway)* and *Charles W. Colson: A Life Redeemed (Doubleday)*.

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