

God's love, mother's milk

by [Margaret R. Miles](#) in the [January 29, 2008](#) issue

For most Christians, the primary symbol of God's love and care for humanity is a cross—a reminder of the crucifixion. Yet for approximately the first five centuries of the Christian movement the crucifixion was not depicted visually because it was too closely associated with a shameful criminal death to be useful as a symbol of love and redemption. What complex theological and social circumstances brought crucifixion scenes to prominence as visual statements about God's love for humanity?

The New Testament assumes that humans are estranged from God and unable to overcome that estrangement. Christ's death on the cross was a sacrifice for the purpose of removing the barrier between God and humans. Christ is pictured as a sacrificial lamb whose death ransomed humanity. But the New Testament offers no precise explanation of the dynamics of that sacrifice.

Similarly, patristic authors offered no single doctrine of redemption. In fact, until Anselm gave his account of Christ's salvific work in the 11th century, no treatise was devoted to explaining *how* Christ's death saves. Patristic authors tended to see the whole incarnation as crucial to redemption; crucifixion and resurrection were understood as two moments in the same process. Paul's image of Christ as victor over demons was also prominent in patristic literature. Other patristic writers emphasized Christ as illuminator, Christ as example, the life of Christ as a form of moral instruction, or Christ as provider of incorruption and deification. It was only gradually that Christ's death as sacrificial victim came to be emphasized in Western theology as the most compelling proof of God's love.

Consider, however, another visual expression and presentation of God's love for humanity. Dozens, perhaps hundreds, of late medieval and Renaissance paintings and sculptures depict the Virgin Mary with one breast exposed as she is nursing or preparing to nurse the infant Christ. The origins of the image are disputed, but whatever its origins, depictions of the lactating Virgin acquired new meaning and new urgency in mid-14th-century Tuscany. In communities under siege from plague, wars and malnutrition, the Virgin's breast was a symbol of God's loving provision of

life, the nourishment and care that sustain life, and the salvation that promises eternal life.

In many of these paintings of the nursing Virgin, Christ twists around to gaze at the viewer, making eye contact that establishes the viewer's identification with Christ and invites the viewer to share the nourishment of the Virgin's breast. Paintings also show Mary cupping in her left hand a naked breast that she exhibits to the adult Christ. With her right hand, she points to a group of sinners huddled at her feet, for whose salvation she pleads. The inscription on one such painting reads: "Dearest son, because of the milk I gave you, have mercy on them." In turn, Christ displays his wounds to God the Father, forwarding the Virgin's plea for mercy. God the Father completes the circle by releasing the descending dove of the Holy Spirit to bring salvation.

For medieval and early modern people the breast was anything but an abstract symbol. In societies that lacked refrigeration and in which animal milk was thought to foster stupidity in the infant who imbibed it, almost all people experienced their first nourishment and pleasure at a woman's breast. In texts and images, religious meaning bonded with physical experience to form a singularly powerful symbol. Although theologians may have claimed that crucifixion scenes exhibited the extremity of God's love for humans, it was scenes of the child suckling at the breast that spoke to people on the basis of their earliest experience.

Several prominent theologians also described God's love for humanity as that of a mother who offers care and provision to her dependent child, both in her womb and in its early experience in the world. Theologians such as Clement of Alexandria, Augustine, Anselm and Bernard of Clairvaux pictured the Christian's nourishment as coming from God's breasts. But it was Julian of Norwich (d. about 1416) who most explicitly analyzed God's care as closely resembling that of a mother: "The mother's service is nearest, readiest, and surest: nearest because it is most natural; readiest because it is most loving; surest because it is truest" (*Showings*, Long text 59).

What happened to the nursing Virgin as symbol of God's loving provision for humanity? The short answer is that changes in society and religion in early modern Western Europe secularized the breast. In the 15th and 16th centuries, representations of an exposed breast became increasingly realistic. No longer the cone-shaped appendage that emerged at shoulder height from a slit in the Virgin Mary's garment, her breast now resembled the engorged nursing breast.

Moreover, by the end of the 15th century, exposed breasts were no longer exhibited exclusively in maternal contexts. Mary Magdalene's naked breasts signified her penitence, extending the meanings of the religious breast. Portrayals of classical subjects, such as Lucretia and Cleopatra, as well as of allegorical topics, increasingly depicted female figures with exposed breasts. Paintings based on stories from the Hebrew Bible, such as Susanna and the elders, Joseph and Potiphar's wife, and Judith and Holofernes, also featured uncovered breasts. With these new subjects, new meanings emerged. By the 16th century, paintings of the nourishing breast of the Virgin and Mary Magdalene's penitent breasts were only two among many contexts in which breasts were seen in art.

Meanwhile, the invention of the printing press and the rapid growth of the printing industry permitted and encouraged new images to circulate. Along with Bibles and the literature of the Protestant Reformation, the presses produced medical anatomies and pornography for an increasingly literate public. The printing press democratized erotic images that formerly circulated in limited editions among elite men. When dissection of corpses began to be publicly practiced in medical theaters, medical illustrations—such as those in Vesalius's 1543 *De humani corporis fabrica*—drew public interest to mapping the interior of human bodies. Illustrations presented male and female bodies as objects for study, not as subjects of religious experience.

By the 16th century, the depiction of breasts in religious paintings was being challenged by Christians. Some Protestant churches, like Zwingli's Grossmünster in Zurich, removed all images from the worship space. Even in Protestant regions (including Lutheran ones) where believers were not iconoclasts, representation of saints and sacred figures became less central in worship and devotion. In Roman Catholic territories, clergy who commissioned paintings were aware that representations of breasts could not be unambiguously directed to religious meaning. At the Council of Trent in December 1593, the Catholic Church rejected "inappropriate" images in religious paintings, a decree that was immediately interpreted as a rejection of nakedness.

By 1750 the public meaning of naked breasts was largely medical or erotic. I have not been able to find a single religious image of the breast painted after 1750. By that time, it was impossible to symbolize God's love by depicting a nursing Virgin. Meanwhile, crucifixion scenes increased in number and in their graphic depiction of violence and suffering. Mitchell Merback's *The Thief, the Cross, and the Wheel: Pain*

*and the Spectacle of Punishment in Medieval and Renaissance Europe* documents an increase in the depiction of violence in Renaissance paintings of the crucifixion, which created a dilemma for artists. Since theologians insisted that Christ *chose* to die for the sins of the human race, he could not be shown as resisting the torture of a slow death on the cross. The two thieves crucified with him were depicted in the throes of hideous torture, their bodies in impossible positions, twisted and broken, but Christ's body was depicted as relaxed and accepting.

Did the increased attention to violent crucifixion scenes arise from social changes in Western Europe? In early modern Europe, a newly patriarchal administration of society developed in many arenas. In economics, commerce moved from the household to a public sphere organized by guilds (from which women were excluded). In lay religiosity, confraternities dedicated to flagellation as the ultimate expression of Christian devotion excluded women. The professionalization of medicine depended in part on controlling midwives and prohibiting women healers. And "the invention of pornography" (the title of a book by Lynn Hunt) claimed women's bodies as objects of pleasure. Moreover, social realities such as malnutrition, pandemic plague, wars and a syphilis epidemic increased anxieties, leading to a culture of fear in which women were disproportionately scapegoated through the persecution of alleged witches. The secularization of the breast occurred in intimate interaction with these social realities.

There are problems with the crucifixion scene as a representation of God's love for humanity. It presents a violent act as salvific. Are crucifixion scenes the unconscious origin, deeply embedded in Western Christian societies, of the sacrificial rhetoric that surrounds war? (On the eve of the Iraq war, George W. Bush said, "Americans understand the costs of conflict because we have paid them in the past. War has no certainty but the certainty of sacrifice.") Does the proliferation of crucifixion scenes habituate us to violence? The equation of love with heroic violence and suffering is typically a male-centered perspective. Depictions of the lactating Virgin, of course, also involve expectations about gender. Is God's love for humanity more adequately represented as the provision of life, daily care and nourishment, or as redemptive suffering?

Perhaps this question needs to be placed in a broader framework. In the religion of the Word made flesh, bodies were always understood to be central. In churches, the senses were purposely and vividly engaged by architecture and decoration that dazzle the eye. The ears were engaged by music and the liturgy of the word. The

eucharistic celebration invited worshipers to taste and ingest the bread and wine. We read of churches in which fresh herbs were spread on the floor, their scent rising as the congregation walked about before, during and after the service. Catechetical instruction included daily exorcisms in which the devil was commanded to depart from the new member's body so that Christ could take residence there. Naked baptism of adults in the full congregation occurred on Easter eve. Scripture urged Christians to "glorify God and bear God in your body" (1 Cor. 6:20). Although records of harsh asceticism have fascinated critics, most ascetic practices were undertaken for the purpose of gently removing distractions to prayer. Bodies were understood to be both site and symbol of religious subjectivity.

The secularization of the breast in early modern Western Europe began a long process in which Christianity came to be seen increasingly as focused on beliefs and doctrines, while bodies and physical practices were marginalized. Both images of the crucifixion and images of the lactating Virgin visualize bodies as capable of communicating Christianity's central message—God's love for humanity. It may well be that both images are needed.

But the value of the nursing breast as a symbol of God's provision might need to be reconsidered in our own time, a time in which the technological capacity for, and interest in, objectifying women's bodies contributes to eating disorders among young women as well as to rape. Understanding the complex social, religious and technological factors that resulted in the eclipse of the nursing Virgin could prepare the way for a critical recovery of this symbol. In societies in which violence is rampant on the street and in the media, the nursing Virgin can perhaps communicate God's love to people in a way that a violent image, the image of one more sacrificial victim, cannot.

*Margaret R. Miles's book A Complex Delight: The Secularization of the Breast, 1350-1750, was published in January by the University of California Press.*