

Fatigue factor: Varieties of Christian motherhood

by [Carol Zaleski](#) in the [September 6, 2005](#) issue

Our plane landed at Gatwick airport on July 7, the day the bombs went off, and the four of us made our way through the mass of bedraggled travelers and machine gun-toting police to the airport bus. The bus ride took longer than the flight, as we painfully inched our way around the great city past massive electronic signs proclaiming “LONDON IS CLOSED.” Finally we arrived in Oxford, where I attended a conference on the “new feminism” and the varieties of Christian motherhood.

Fatigued and a bit worried about our children, I spent the bus ride contemplating the ironies of the conference. How many mothers have time or energy to attend conferences and give papers analyzing the maternal experience? Most conferences I have attended are distinctly inhospitable to tired mothers and their children. At least for the span of the conference, one is supposed to be a professional, on one’s best game, all fired up and ready to pounce on problematic assumptions.

But here we were, many of us with children in tow, far from being on our best game. One speaker, a social anthropologist from Germany, gave her entire captivating talk on “integral mothering” with a keyed-up toddler balanced on one hip; and during the panel discussion discreetly nursed the child under her shawl. She made her case. When society makes room for the seamless integration of motherhood and fruitful work, everybody wins.

A Pentecostal single mother of five boys testified to her lifesaving friendship with a Benedictine nun. The Benedictine nun in question spoke of the experience of being wed to Christ in solemn profession, and of the maternal dimension of consecrated life. Four teenaged girls, forming a panel, shared their own essentially similar vision of consecrated life—they spoke, with all the charming idealism of their tribe, of their intention to become mothers without delay while simultaneously employing their talents and education in service to Christ and humanity. To cap it all off, an older woman theologian provided a hilarious history of great women throughout the ages.

Admittedly the event lacked a certain edginess. Nobody subjected anybody to shrewd postmodernist analysis. Nobody tried to trip anybody up. Who had the time, or energy, or mental focus for such things? Not good will alone, but good will assisted by maternal tiredness and distraction created this idyllic scene.

Such are the virtues of fatigue. Fatigue is a gift to our fallen human nature, without which we might have the stamina for endless mutual harassment and mischief. Fatigue sets a limit on obsessions, grudges, vain posturing and zealous schemes to reform the world. Fatigue produces grouchiness but also releases empathy, patience and compassion. The fatigue of a mother is so profound that it goes down to the bottom of the deepest well in the garden where the world began. Every mother’s body keeps in perpetuity a record of that fatigue, and in this sorority of fatigue all mothers—potentially all women—are united.

We women are also united by anxieties—an undercurrent of tense fear in which nature and culture conspire. We worry that we may lose our grip on things, get pushed aside and be robbed of our inheritance, our attractiveness, our security, our youth. The post–World War II sexual revolution made such anxieties worse. Liberated women had to endure liberated men like the father of a friend of mine who announced at the family dinner table, “I have a surprise for you all. Here’s my other wife.” The message went out to young women: you can be anything you want, as long as you escape your oppressive past. But what should I want? You must make it up as you go along. You must look within, using all the modern techniques of self-investigation, and you must look around you, ever

vigilant to make sure you're getting your share of opportunities for achievement and success. As you grow older, you will feel these achievements slip through your fingers. Perhaps you'll get one of those bumper stickers that say "they aren't hot flashes, they're power surges"—but you will age nonetheless. No amount of success can outrun aging and death. It's like putting makeup on a snow woman.

Secular feminism performed necessary and providential groundwork, but a horizontal, immanent sisterhood, bent on power-seeking and unhindered choice, cannot in the end reveal to us the mystery of our vocation. Feminism in Christ is another matter. As I listened to the Benedictine nun speak with conviction of the maternal dimension of her contemplative vocation, I realized that the Christian life opens all doors for women. The whole array of women's roles—single, married, mother, grandmother, at work in the world, at work in the home, or any of the myriad variations—can be true vocations, expressions of spiritual maternity guided by a transcendent ideal and bringing lasting joy and fulfillment. The nun, the anthropologist and the single mother: all these took on the hues of that feminine and comprehensively human ethos embodied in Mary's "yes" to her divine assignment. From this maiden and mother, faithful daughter to her redeemer son, springs a greater variety of paths for women than we may have dared to imagine.