

MATRESCENCE AND THE PASCHAL MYSTERY: A RAHNERIAN REFLECTION ON THE DEATH AND REBIRTH EXPERIENCES OF NEW MOTHERS OF INFANTS

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Abstract

This article explores the idea that motherhood is an invitation to engage with the paschal mystery and can thus be a salvific experience in the lives of women. This is of even greater significance for a Christian mother who can explicitly name the experience as her own sharing in the paschal event of Jesus. This article will focus on crisis moments of motherhood in a contemporary Western context, exploring particularly the issues raised in first becoming a mother, and on the initial years of motherhood. Using Karl Rahner's theologies on grace, cross, death, and resurrection, the article seeks to forge the beginnings of a theology of mothering.

Keywords: Anonymous Christianity, Feminist Theology, Grace, Karl Rahner, Motherhood, Paschal Mystery, Salvation

The birth of a child can be an experience of death as well as an invitation into new life for a first time mother. Contemporary

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Western lifestyles and expectations often leave women unprepared for the dramatic changes motherhood brings, particularly for those women who choose to stay at home as full-time mothers. Sacrifices such as putting on hold one's career and social life along with the experiences of monotony, exhaustion, social invisibility, and isolation have often never been contemplated, let alone prepared for. Furthermore, the difficulties of the first few months of a baby's life and the redefinition required in a mother's self-identity create a series of crises for her. These crises are ongoing as a mother continues to redefine herself at different stages of her child's life.

This article explores the idea that motherhood is an invitation to engage with the paschal mystery and can thus be a salvific experience in the lives of women who become mothers. This is of even greater significance for a Christian mother who can explicitly name the experience as her own sharing in the paschal event of Jesus. This article will focus on crisis moments of motherhood in a contemporary Western context, exploring particularly the issues raised in first becoming a mother, and on the initial years of mothering.

The paschal mystery is at the heart of the Christian faith. It is celebrated in every liturgical gathering of the People of God. It is highlighted every year during the Easter Triduum. It underpins all the sacraments, feasts, and seasons of the Church's year. From Baptism to the Anointing of the Sick, from the Annunciation to the Triumph of the Cross, from Advent to Lent, it is the paschal mystery that is being celebrated. Yet whilst it is at the heart of Christianity, for some Christians, the paschal mystery can seem distant and unconnected to their daily lives. This can be true, moreover, for mothers who consider the paschal mystery as an idealistic notion in contrast to dealing with the practical realities and difficulties of the every day.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1260 suggests otherwise.¹ It says whilst one encounters the paschal mystery explicitly in the liturgy, this mystery can also be encountered implicitly in daily life.² Karl Rahner's theology of grace develops this further by saying that people do the will of God whenever they pursue the truth and show

¹*The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1260, <http://www.vatican.va/archive/catechism/p2s2c1a1.htm>, Accessed 13 April 2009.

²Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes*, 22 similarly says that salvation through the grace of Christ work in Christians and non-Christians alike, http://www.vatican.va/archive/list_councils/ii_vatican-council/documents/vat-ii_cons_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html, Accessed 13 April 2009.

commitment and love in their daily duties, even without having an explicit faith assent to Jesus.³ In this they are saved.⁴

Employing Rahner's theology of grace, that in the midst of human experience God's grace and salvation may be found, this article begins with the naming of the joys (the resurrection moments) and sorrows (crosses and deaths) of early motherhood. Rahner's thoughts on Christ's cross, death, and resurrection are then used to start theologizing on early motherhood. Throughout this article I will be asking: How is motherhood a lived experience of the paschal mystery of Jesus (and therefore a potentially salvific experience for a mother)?⁵

³See Karl Rahner, "Anonymous Christians." Whilst I am a Christian mother reflecting on the Christian concept of the paschal mystery, I am strongly conscious of the salvific effect motherhood can have in the lives of non-Christian mothers too. This is why I propose that the saving grace offered through the experience of the paschal mystery through motherhood can be available to all mothers whether they are Christian or not. Following on from Rahner's theology of grace, one can conclude that all mothers are invited to undertake a lived experience of the paschal mystery, whether it is explicitly acknowledged or not, whenever they undergo the difficulties of motherhood and rise from these difficulties to become more mature, compassionate, life-affirming, life-giving, other-centered and forgiving persons, as exemplified by Jesus in the journey through his passion and death to the resurrection.

⁴I do not intend to suggest that a mother who undergoes an experience of the paschal mystery will ultimately present us with an idealized picture of motherhood. Such a portrait of idealized motherhood has already been developed in the cult of the Virgin Mary. Ironically, this high Mariology effectively removes from the mother of Jesus her human nature, making her a model impossible to live up to. Mary is imagined as a paragon of womanly virtue, as in less virgin-yet-mother who never gets angry, loses patience, gets tired, doubts herself, and who devotes herself completely and whole-heartedly to her son. Such unattainable perfection is far from the reality of what is experienced as a mother in twenty-first century Western culture. Whilst women experience rebirth and renewal by engaging with the paschal mystery through motherhood, they still remain imperfect human beings who can sometimes be impatient, insecure, unforgiving and so on.

⁵This is really an advanced question from the simple questioning of a mother that says "Is there salvation in the midst of the exhaustion and unrecognized work?" or "Where is God in the chaos of early motherhood?" I would like to clarify that this article does not imply that motherhood is the ultimate goal of true womanhood or that only in motherhood can a woman truly be saved. This article does not wish to imply either that full-time "stay-at-home" mothering is the only proper way to mother a child or in contrast, that working mothers are better mothers. Although motherhood is a universal experience the experiences spoken of in this article are not to be taken as encompassing the experience of mothers for all times and cultures. This article also does not seek to promote motherhood above fatherhood. In fact many of the experiences discussed can apply equally to fathers. Finally this article is written with acknowledgement of the loving support fathers can provide mothers and therefore assisting them in undergoing the paschal mystery in motherhood.

1. Motherhood and the Paschal Experience

1.1. The Human Struggles in Daily Living: Cross Experiences in Motherhood

When a woman becomes pregnant for the first time, there seems to be a great emphasis on preparing for the difficulties of birth and the baby's physical needs. According to Western culture, one prepares for a baby by becoming medically well informed and acquiring the requisite baby paraphernalia. However, preparation for the emotional and spiritual upheavals that may follow after the birth is greatly lacking. Although labour and birthing as physical experiences are incredibly painful, life after birth — especially in terms of emotionally dealing with motherhood — can be far more difficult.⁶

In *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, Adrienne Rich speaks of the cross of responsibility for her children, her feelings of inadequacy, the realization and frustrating confrontations with her limitations, but also of her great enjoyment over the beauty of her children, their love for her and her love for them.⁷ Some expectant women may expect difficulties in early motherhood. Others may imagine just the love and pure enjoyment of their children. Either way, new mothers can be highly unprepared for what difficulties new motherhood may reveal — their own dark sides — selfishness, resentment, despair, and rage of which Rich discusses in her book. Yet it is through these difficulties — the cross experiences in motherhood — women are forced to face the truth about their selves, their own strengths and weaknesses: it is by the presence of these difficulties — the crosses — that mothers are able to experience extreme joys, such as love and the enjoyment of their children.

One particular example of a cross experience in motherhood, that which contributes greatly to the frustrations of new motherhood, is the cross of monotony.⁸ Reference to “the cross” generally conjures

⁶Yet there are women who have transitioned into their new role as mothers with relative ease due to a combination of factors such as their exposure to babies or the presence of many helping hands.

⁷Adrienne Cecile Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1995, 21-22. Whilst this book was published over twenty years ago, Rich's experience still speaks aptly of the experiences of joys and sorrows in motherhood.

⁸See Cristina Lledo Gomez, “Early Motherhood and the Paschal Mystery: A Rahnerian Reflection on the Death and Rebirth Experiences of New Mothers,” *The Australasian Catholic Record*, Vol. 88, No. 2, June 2011, “131-150 for a table outlining “The Cross, Death and Resurrection Experiences in Motherhood.” It contains other possible crosses of motherhood — each of which need further exploration in their own right.

up images of physical torture. But the mind-numbing, isolating, and repetitive work of caring for a baby can also be both a source of suffering and self-emptying experience for mothers. In the work of caring for infants, there is a never-ending cycle of feeding, cleaning, and settling. The monotony of feeding, cleaning, and settling children provides no sense of permanent or recognizable achievement. There is no public recognition for the work accomplished. There is no creativity required. There is just the menial and tedious repetition of unrewarded and seemingly endless physical labours — the punishment of Sisyphus.⁹

1.2. Giving Up of the Old Self: Death Experiences in Motherhood

Facing the crosses of motherhood inevitably leads to crucial moments of decision in a mother's life. A woman may decide to accept the necessary deaths in motherhood, moving from the old type of person that she was to the new. Or she may decide to ignore these deaths, attempting to cling on to her old self. Sheila Kitzinger makes the point that motherhood can either completely change a woman such that she is everything to a child and nothing to herself. Or a woman can hire someone else to mother and care for her child's needs such that having a child makes minimal disruption to her life.¹⁰

When a mother insists that a child would not impose on her lifestyle and choices for the future, that it would not force her to make personal sacrifices, she refuses to face the death of her old identity as non-mother. This shows that having a child can be the onset of an identity crisis for a woman, for while physically she has become a mother, mentally a woman can refuse to integrate her new identity as "mother" into her old self.

There are ideologies of motherhood, which still exist universally in the world, and they do not assist in the formation of a woman's new identity as mother. One example of such ideology is that "motherhood and womanhood are intermeshed; to be considered a mature, balanced, fulfilled adult a woman should be a mother."¹¹

⁹In Greek mythology Sisyphus was punished by the gods by having to roll a boulder up a steep hill, but before he could reach the top of the hill, it would always stumble back down again, forcing him to begin again. Homer, *The Odyssey*, XI 593, 141.

¹⁰Sheila Kitzinger, *Ourselves as Mothers: The Universal Experience of Motherhood*, London: Double Day, 1992, 194-195.

¹¹Betsy Wearing, *The Ideology of Motherhood*, Sydney: George Allen and Unwin, 1984, 72. I quote a reference here from a Western context. But from my travels around the world, presenting in the area of feminist theologies, I have seen that some people still assent to this ideology even if the dominant surrounding culture believed

Such ideologies impose on a woman and contribute to the confusion over the formation of her new identity. They impose particular values on her and appear as a threat of the annihilation of her old self. Because such ideologies exist a woman may be made to feel that she has but two choices which are at extreme opposite ends: to become a mother whose individuality is completely absorbed into motherhood or to become a mother only in a physical sense with mostly an unchanged spiritual and emotional sense of self.

Whilst a child may seem alien to a mother when s/he is first born, the time spent with the child and the growing love for this child eventually move a mother to respond in love and wonderment to this growing being that is of her own flesh and blood. The battle between mothering and being mothered is resolved only when the new mother is able to see that the two states of being can co-exist in her. She can mother herself by attending to her needs for affirmation and self-actualization. She can at the same time respond to her own child's needs and eventually the community around her. The decision to recognize the death of the old self and the resurrection of the new self is not a single moment in a mother's life. Rather, it is the ongoing growth in relationship with and an ongoing love for the child. By entering into the authentic death of her old self, a mother opens herself up to the resurrection moments of having a new self and also the basic enjoyment of the rewards of motherhood.

1.3. Salvific and Life-Changing Moments: Resurrection Experiences in Motherhood

Resurrection experiences in motherhood are the life-giving and salvific moments in a mother's life. They are salvific in the sense that following the struggles, the kenotic (self-emptying) but also revelatory (self-revealing) experiences, the resurrection moments are the fulfilling (refilling) and positively transformative experiences of a woman's new life (renewed life).

A possible resurrection experience in motherhood is giving birth to new life.¹² Birthing can transform a woman's intense suffering in

otherwise. Further, I think these same people can be mixed on this issue — outwardly, they may express themselves to be contemporary in thinking, open to the idea of the woman as being more than a mother. Yet, in practice, the ideal remains that a woman is at her best as a mother, and one who is completely selfless to the point of almost reaching self-negation. Such beliefs derive from their (mis)understandings of the Christian faith but also they are tied to familial and cultural backgrounds or inheritance.

¹²The experience of childbirth is paradoxical as it can be both the most excruciating and exhilarating experience of one's life encompassed in a single event.

labour into extreme joy over the creation of a new life and her participation in it. The pain of birthing itself is so great that the screams and groans of women in labour may be their only relief. Bodies may shake involuntarily and violently from the intense pain. Stress levels are at their capacity as women attempt to undertake an almost impossible and yet natural process of life. Death may even be a desired whim at the time.

The salvific moments are not only found in the peak experiences of life but in the everyday quotidian moments, which more commonly present themselves. One such experience is the constant giving required of a mother. It hurts to give, especially when a mother feels she would rather curl up in bed and pretend she is not a mother for just five minutes. But it is in this giving that love grows. The child learns through the mother's response that his or her mother does hear its cries, responds to it, and because of this is ultimately loved.

But it is not only the mother who loves unconditionally, but the child who loves his/her mother unconditionally. This too is the resurrection experience. In a world where love seems to be given with condition (you are acceptable only if you look the part, have the right qualifications and experience, possess the right social etiquette or moral characteristics), a child loves his or her mother with complete acceptance, forgiveness, and loyalty towards her.¹³

Women who mother have the opportunity to learn about themselves, transform into better selves, and grow in to appreciation of themselves and others. Resurrection experiences indicate the positive transformations of women who have grown to be more honest, more true to themselves, more loving of their children and others, and ultimately more human.

In one sense, Christ's cross, death, and resurrection experience resonates strongly with this particular experience. To explore this idea in this article would not give justice to its depth and possibilities. The scope of this article only allows for the exploration of a few examples of resurrection experiences. I am conscious too of the possibility that birth can be anything but a resurrection experience. For various reasons some mothers would consider birthing as just a cross and death experience.

¹³The resurrection experiences in motherhood are numerous but they may be categorized in (but not limited to) three areas as shown in *Engendering Motherhood*. They are (1) personal growth and development (2) transcendent change, and (3) practical changes in lifestyle and the use of their time. Martha McMahan, *Engendering Motherhood: Identity and Self-Transformation in Women's Lives*, New York: The Guildford Press, 1995, 147. See also Penelope Washbourne, *Becoming Woman*, London: Harper & Row, 1977, 128. She articulates that the positive transformational effect that motherhood can offer women as "an occasion for growth that involves moments of renewal."

2. Towards a Theology of Motherhood

The question being answered in this chapter is “How is motherhood a lived experience of the paschal mystery?” The previous section named the struggles of daily living, dying to the old self, and positive self-transformations in motherhood as implicit life experiences of the cross, death, and resurrection for mothers. This section now focuses on the paschal mystery as an explicitly Christian theological concept and explores how this Mystery is truly present in the life of a mother. Therefore, this section shows how the experiences of daily struggles, dying, and resurrection moments area means of “taking up the cross of Christ,” “dying with Christ,” and “resurrecting with Christ.”

2.1. Taking up the Cross of Christ

The phrase “taking up the cross” can be a dangerous phrase to use in today’s Western culture. It can reinforce the caricature image of Christians as a group of people attracted to self-imposed guilt and unnecessary meaningless suffering. Yet it is the very phrase Rahner uses himself when theologizing about the cross of Christ.¹⁴ This phrase may be better understood as opposite to the avoidance of suffering so prevalent in current Western popular culture. It is not the taking on of suffering wherever it may be found or as a mere end in itself. Instead it is facing and undertaking the difficulties of life that come with one’s commitment to another person: especially when that person is a dependent and fragile other. It is an easier option to avoid the suffering one must undergo to fulfil one’s commitment.

Rahner says there are two ways of living:¹⁵ either taking up one’s own cross (facing the task ahead even if it includes suffering) or avoiding this cross (pretending that one’s task can be accomplished by avoiding any possible suffering involved). Avoiding the cross keeps one in a state of anxiety or frustration; whilst taking up that cross transforms that anxiety into something that is truly life-giving, rather than simply appearing to be.

Yet what relevance does taking up the cross signify for mothers in abusive situations? These mothers can be given the “Christian message” to remain victims: to take on their suffering passively, as Jesus supposedly did.¹⁶ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza says the basic

¹⁴Karl Rahner, “Self Realisation and Taking up One’s Cross,” in *Theological Investigations*, 9, London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1974, 253-257.

¹⁵Rahner, “Self Realisation and Taking up One’s Cross,” 256-257.

¹⁶See Barbara E. Reid, *Taking Up the Cross: New Testament Interpretation through Latina and Feminist Eyes*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007; Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1973, 77.

experience of women is inferiority and “otherness” in a patriarchal society and religion and that women “internalise that their experience of alienation and anger is just our personal problem, that something must be wrong with *us* and that we have to accept and adapt to things as they are.”¹⁷

Rahner’s advocacy for taking up of one’s own cross is not to be taken in the sense of accepting resignation in the face of abuse.¹⁸ Rahner says that taking up one’s cross implies the acceptance of death and the suffering that is involved with this death as a part of living.¹⁹ Taking up one’s cross means to be called away from a shallow life wherein “happiness” is experienced without any struggle or death involved. A mother — who as Rahner would say accepts the abiding fear of death — accepts the frustration and darkness of undergoing the monotony, exhaustion, doubt, isolation, and so on in mothering.²⁰

Rahner believes that taking up one’s own cross in daily life is synonymous with taking up the cross of Christ, whether it is acknowledged openly as such or not.²¹ For a mother then to take up the cross of Christ is to take up her own crosses in motherhood. The converse is also true: to take up the crosses in motherhood is to take up the cross of Christ.

And yet facing the difficulties — accepting them as part of reality — are all more likely to occur from within the loving support of a community. Mothers may have the support of family and friends, but it is in sharing the difficulties and joys with other mothers — in their own happiness and struggles too — that a mother is more able to face her crosses.

2.2. Dying with Christ

Facing death and dying as Christ did must involve more than a personal character transformation wherein one accepts the abiding fear of death. Since the Christian God is a God involved from the beginning of the world, and constantly present in the Holy Spirit, dying as Christ cannot simply be about following the example of the historical Jesus. It has to be about Christ’s death also incorporating humanity into his death. It has to be that even before we choose to

¹⁷Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, “Breaking the Silence – Becoming Visible,” in *The Power of Naming: A Concilium Reader in Feminist Liberation Theology*, ed. E. Schüssler Fiorenza, Manila: St Pauls, 2004, 169.

¹⁸Rahner, “Self Realisation and Taking up One’s Cross,” 257.

¹⁹Rahner, “Self Realisation and Taking up One’s Cross,” 257.

²⁰Rahner, “Self Realisation and Taking up One’s Cross,” 257.

²¹Rahner, “Self Realisation and Taking up One’s Cross,” 256.

follow the example of the historical Jesus — in the taking up of his cross, in his way of dying, in his courageous conviction in God's power being stronger than death or any power on earth — we must have already died with Christ. The possibility of our following Jesus in his dying can only result from Jesus' death already having incorporated humanity and its state of constant struggle and death into his death.

For Rahner, Christ's death is to be understood as the ongoing presence of death in life. This is what he calls "Christian realism."²² Whilst taking up the cross of Christ can be about facing the difficulties in one's own life, dying with Christ is firstly realizing that to live is to also be at death's door. This reality cannot be ignored. Yet, as discussed in the previous section, in popular Western culture, the reality of death's constant presence is ignored in preference to the pursuit of instant gratification. Tantalus from Greek mythology exemplifies this human tendency towards pleasure and its fruitless promise of the everlasting. For Tantalus, food and drink are forever just out of reach. Thus, life for him becomes a desperate pursuit of a lasting happiness that will always remain elusive.²³

For a new mother the acceptance of death's constant presence is the acceptance that new motherhood like any other stage in life entails dying experiences. Rather than being surprised by the death required of her old self — that it is happening to her prior somewhat ordered life — a mother who realizes death's constant presence also realizes that it is a normal part of any human experience and realizes that what is happening to her as a new mother is the constant call of the death of her old self.

For Rahner, death is that point at which we do not have anything, not even ourselves, to save us from the "apparently empty infinity."²⁴ This "apparently empty infinity" is what Rahner calls the absurdity or contradictory nature of death.²⁵ It is, as he says, a place where one

²²See Harvey D. Egan, "Karl Rahner – Teacher of Christian Life," in *Karl Rahner: Mystic Everyday Life*, New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1998, 175.

²³In Greek mythology Tantalus's punishment for stealing from the gods was to be condemned to an eternity of hunger and thirst in Hades. He was made to stand in a pool of water beneath a fruit tree with low branches. Whenever he reached to pluck the fruit the branches receded from his grasp. Whenever he bent down to get a drink, the water drained before he could get any. Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. Walter Shewring, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980, XI 583, 141.

²⁴Karl Rahner, "Ideas for a Theology of Death," in *Theological Investigations*, 13, London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1975, 182.

²⁵Rahner, "Ideas for a Theology of Death," 182.

cannot even console oneself.²⁶ For: "In the last resort what happens in death is the same for all: we are deprived of everything, even of ourselves; we all fall, each of us alone, into the dark abyss where there are no further ways."²⁷ New motherhood can often reach moments of "apparently empty infinity" and "dark abysses." The change of identity from non-mother who wants to be mothered to mother who must mother a dependent other is one example. The points of "apparently empty infinity" for a new mother may be times when her difficulties seem to overwhelm her and she can reach a stage in which she does not know herself any more and if ever she will find herself again.

Yet to die with Christ means to not remain in this nothingness or absurd circumstance. For Rahner there are two ways to respond to death:

Either the subject in the last resort culpably refuses to accept any freely bestowed love from another person... or it accepts with resignation and hope this eclipse of all particular realities as the dawn and approach of that silent infinity into which each particular act of freedom has hitherto always risen above its individual object.²⁸

A mother can refuse the love of God as shown through her child, or she can accept with resignation and hope the formation of a new identity, integrated into her old self, which is her formation into a more human, loving, and Godly being. The love of a child, representing God's complete love, can be easily rejected by a mother when she becomes caught up in the hurts of her own childhood or in her own needs. The alternative is that even as a mother carries her unmourned past, she chooses to stay in the present moment.²⁹ When she does this a mother makes the act of belief that attending to the quotidian, the seemingly ordinary, the nitty-gritty, and the difficulties of motherhood are not ends in themselves but are the necessary works of love for a child. More often it is a thankless job, but sometimes, the child rewards with a smile, a look, or a hug of complete love and gratefulness, and the absurdity of the difficulties of the mother's life seem to be transformed. Moreover, when the mother sees the child thrive, it can be a life-giving and salvific experience for her.

²⁶Rahner, "Ideas for a Theology of Death," 182.

²⁷Karl Rahner, "Following the Crucified," in *Theological Investigations*, 19, London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1978, 166.

²⁸Rahner, "Following the Crucified," 164.

²⁹See David Richo, *How to Be An Adult: A Handbook on Psychological and Spiritual Integration*, New York: Paulist Press, 1991, 14. Richo explains that adults can carry hurts from childhood, which in turn affect the way they relate both with others and their parents in the present moment.

This is not to say that a mother must completely surrender herself to motherhood such that her own identity is found only in it. Surrendering according to Rahner is:

The abandoning of oneself in the hope of finding the inconceivable fullness — (it) takes place in the ultimately inaccessible depths of one's freedom when this freedom calmly "lets go," i.e., lets the particular die, believing in hope that in this way (and ultimately *only* in this way), the whole, the fullness, "God" will be received.³⁰

Jesus is the perfect example of complete surrender to God and is thus seen as the perfect model of human living. Rahner says Jesus took on the fate of human beings, namely death, but he also made death his own act.³¹ This he did by his complete surrender to God. This is in contrast to the idea that death was something that happened to Christ without his consent. According to Rahner, in making death his own act, Jesus himself assumed "that which is beyond all human conception and control, and himself enacts what has to be suffered."³²

But Jesus is also "the other," the incarnation of the incomprehensible love of God in the history of humanity. We can now answer the question posed previously: How does Jesus incorporate humanity into his death? Jesus does this by embodying death as it should be (exemplifying for us the death we must embrace) and embodying God's reconciliation with humanity through this death (God gives Godself to us in Jesus first, before we can give of ourselves to God in death). For a mother then, dying with Christ not only entails following Jesus' example of complete surrender to God in death, it also involves living in the reality that it is God who first reached out to her (through Jesus) to save her in her death.

In his death, Jesus completely surrendered himself to God. God in turn accepted this complete surrender and raised Jesus from the dead. This is what is meant by the resurrection of Christ. In motherhood, does this mean that when a mother completely surrenders herself to life and thus to God, God raises her from her death? How so? We know that accepting God's offer of love is to accept the resurrection, one's own salvation. But what does the resurrection of a mother look like?

2.3. Living in Christ's Resurrection

To Rahner, the first principle of the resurrection is "the definitive redeemed state of the person and the history of a human being with

³⁰Rahner, "Self Realisation and Taking up One's Cross," 255.

³¹Rahner, "Self Realisation and Taking up One's Cross," 255.

³²Karl Rahner, "Theological Considerations on Moment of Death," in *Theological Investigations*, 11, London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1974, 320.

God; it does not mean a return to our spatial-temporal biological life.”³³ The resurrection is not to be seen as a resuscitation of Jesus’ body and therefore of our own bodies. Rather, it is God’s saving act in a person’s life. This saving act is seen as part of a history in which both God and the human person have reached out to one another: God’s presence is seen in the processes and people of life and the human person transcends herself and is transformed by her suffering and death experiences in life. Resurrection in a mother’s life is seen in her ongoing transformations through crisis moments when she thought she would not survive. Resurrection comes as she grows in trust that she will not be overcome by her cross and death experiences. Rather she will become stronger, more resilient, wise, and strategic.

In this transformation she experiences the resurrection. Birth can exemplify this resurrection experience. For in labour, a mother’s pain can be so overwhelming. Yet after the birth of her child she is in the position to realize her own strength, resilience, and wisdom.

The second principle of the resurrection according to Rahner is that “man can gain such an experience of a unique character only when and insofar as he brings to it his own hope for *himself* that his own existence will be definitively revealed.”³⁴ That is, one can only believe in Jesus’ resurrection if one also believes in his or her own resurrection, his or her own salvation from nothingness and despair. As well, Rahner says one believes in his or her own resurrection,

Wherever there is real hoping and loving... even when a person with this hope and love lacks the ability or courage to verbally thematicize and objectify the hope of resurrection implicit in the mere continuance of his existence.³⁵

For a mother, as shown above, this hope appears as a trust that motherhood is not swallowed up by its own crosses and deaths. A mother’s trust in God is a surrender to God — the acceptance of the bigger reality and the complete love of God, which she can experience in the immediate sense through her children. By accepting her children as they are as she spends time with them, teaches them, cares for them, and even fights with them, she loves them completely.

³³See Karl Rahner, “What Does It Mean Today to Believe in Jesus Christ?” *Theological Investigations*, 18, London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1978, 151.

³⁴Rahner, “What Does It Mean Today to Believe in Jesus Christ?” *Theological Investigations*, 18, London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1978, 151.

³⁵Rahner, “What Does It Mean Today to Believe in Jesus Christ?” 152.

In conjunction, in her children's complete acceptance of her (even in their rebellion and assertion of their individuality), a mother receives the complete love of God. For as Rahner believes, love of oneself by the complete acceptance of oneself and love of one's neighbour (by true loving and commitment) is the encounter with God.³⁶

The third principle according to Rahner is that, this hope of ours of our own resurrection and the encounter with the claim that Jesus' fate makes on us then encounter the disciples' message of his resurrection and the faith of two thousand years of the history of hope of Christendom...³⁷

Our faith in Christ's resurrection, and thus in our own resurrection, is not based on idealism, but on the witnesses of the first disciples. As Rahner says, Jesus' resurrection was "perceived and attested to by men plunged into despair by the sight of the disaster of Jesus' life and in no way inclined to believe anything of this kind."³⁸ As well, the hopes of the Christian community of two thousand years attest to this faith in the resurrection. A mother can look at mothers from the past — her own ancestors as well as other mothers in general — who have survived, hoped, believed, and lived through birthing, the first year, "terrible twos," the unpredictable teenage years, and so forth; if they survived, hoped, loved, and believed throughout motherhood, she can possibly too. Again the mother's community plays a vital role in this hoping and believing.

Rahner's fourth principle is

if our own transcendence to God's immediacy in freedom is alive in what we describe as grace, if it is realized and becomes explicit in history and in the encounter with history, if with our questing Christology we encounter Jesus of Nazareth, then we certainly have the opportunity for our own experience of the Risen One, even though that experience is not entirely independent of the testimony of the first disciples.³⁹

By our constant searching for truth in life, our human orientation towards the transcendent, whether it is acknowledged as God, or Jesus, or complete love, or the absolute, and experienced in one's life as such, we can thus believe that our own resurrection is possible.

³⁶The idea that loving one's neighbour is hope in the face of death is from Rahner's, "Ideas for a Theology of Death," 186. The implication here is that God and the individual can be made partners in death, resurrection, and ultimately the individual's salvation.

³⁷Rahner, "What Does It Mean Today to Believe in Jesus Christ?" 152.

³⁸Rahner, "What Does It Mean Today to Believe in Jesus Christ?" 152.

³⁹Rahner, "What Does It Mean Today to Believe in Jesus Christ?" 153.

3. Conclusion

This article has attempted to answer the question: How is the paschal mystery a lived experience in motherhood? In response, it has explored how motherhood can be a locus for the saving actions of God. It has shown that both the Christian and non-Christian mother experience the paschal mystery in the implicit sense through the daily difficulties, the call to the death of the old self, and the joys and positive transformations involved in motherhood. Rahner's insights into the practical application of the paschal mystery in one's life have made possible a theological reflection on the experiences of motherhood. Therefore, Christ's cross, death, and resurrection are not just statements for a Christian mother's belief, separate from daily life. Rather, they can state God's intimate concern for her, the individual, but also for mothers all over the world. Motherhood is an invitation to the woman to participate in the reality of living — the undeniable crosses, the constant presence of death, and the hope of the resurrection (that does come into fruition), which always comes with the crosses and deaths. The paschal mystery in motherhood is experienced in as much as a mother "takes up the cross of Christ" (does not run away from difficulties), dies with Christ (lets go of the old self-consumed or in contrast the self-abnegation), and lives in his resurrection (living in the hope beyond the attractive pull of despair, brought about by Christ's resurrection). Even if a mother does not explicitly believe in Christ, by her actions, in loving her children as well as herself, and in learning to love and be loved by others, she lives her true self. By this, she implicitly believes in the paschal mystery and is therefore saved by it.

For a Christian mother who seeks God in the midst of her motherhood, the memorial acclamation she proclaims in the liturgy "Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again" can become a very meaningful statement. For in so much as she takes up the cross of Christ, dies with Him, and lives in the Hope of his resurrection, she lives this paschal mystery in the struggles, deaths, transformations, and joys of motherhood. By the work and the very being of her own body, a mother is invited to carry the mystery of the cross, death, and resurrection of Jesus.