

The Vintage Voice

Serving The Church Pension Fund's Family of Beneficiaries

■ May 2011

Some Thoughts on Mom, Reverend Mothers, Baptists, and the Blessed Virgin Mary

The Rev. Fred Fenton

I have always thought Mother's Day should be added to the Prayer Book calendar. Why ignore what is on the mind of everyone on the second Sunday in May and the only reason some family members are in church at all that day?

My mother was a pioneer woman doctor. She was the only woman in her medical school class of 1926, and the "boys" took every opportunity to tease her. Although my mother was a staunch Baptist all her life, her Baptist church in Los Angeles during her medical schooling was no more supportive than her male classmates; not only was she reminded that a woman's place was in the home, but — even more bluntly — she was informed that no Christian woman would ever think of giving a medical exam to a man!

At a time when most women in America were homemakers, mother had all the responsibilities of working women today. She was a fulltime professional as well as wife, mother, homemaker, Sunday school superintendent, and community volunteer. Although I may not have seen as much of her as some other children saw their mothers, I never doubted her love for me.

In the seventh grade, I enjoyed taking my turn running the U.S. flag up the pole in front of my school. I was overweight, described by an internist as "a good feeder." One day, happily performing my flag duty, I leaned over and felt the rear seam of my cotton pants open up. What to do? I walked sideways to the front entrance of the school, keeping my back to the bushes. Once inside, I continued walking sideways along the hall to the front office.

Mother was with a patient when her secretary interrupted. "Frederick's on the phone, Dr. Helen. He says he must talk with you." As soon as she understood my predicament, mother said, "I'm coming. Stay right where you are." Leaving an office full of patients, she drove across town to our home to get another pair of pants and came to the school office to rescue me. She stood blocking the view while I slipped out of one pair of pants and into the other.

Experiences such as this one may not seem like much but were in fact formational. Perhaps the first time that I realized just how influential was when I was in seminary a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away. A pastoral theology professor said some of us might be there because of our mothers. I felt like crawling under my desk. He went on to say that was all right, as long as there were *other* reasons for our being there. I still remember the feeling of relief that came over me at that moment. I wanted to think God and I had decided on seminary for me, even though I knew in my heart the key role mother had played in my "call" to ordained ministry.

My mother's presence kept reappearing unexpectedly throughout seminary. There was the time my wife and I enrolled our firstborn in a preschool founded by American Baptists to serve the children of poor families in our Boston neighborhood. (We were, after all, living on a slim student

budget and were therefore one of those “poor” neighborhood families.) The woman in charge, hearing our family name, asked my wife if by chance she knew a *Doctor* Helen Fenton. Surprised, Billie told her that Helen Fenton was her mother-in-law, in California. Beaming, the woman said, “Dr. Fenton has been sending us money for years.”

As graduation neared, my mother helped me to avoid a crisis of faith that swamped many of my classmates. Everybody had been reading Bultmann in those days and listening to our professors opine that perhaps not all the creedal statements were strictly necessary to the Christian faith. So what was one to do — my classmates began to worry — if the canonical examiners asked about the Virgin Birth?

When asked why I didn’t share their concern, I said my mother made sure I grew up as a Baptist; I was taught the King James Bible and orthodox Christian belief; I would have no problem affirming my childhood faith. They were furious.

As things worked out, one classmate had his ordination held up because of his position on the Virgin Birth and was required to write a paper on Mary. I, on the other hand — who would have had no problem giving the orthodox answer — never was asked the question.

Perhaps it is also due to my mother that I never had an issue with women priests. In 1978, while rector of the Santa Monica parish, I invited an ordained woman — a wife and mother — to join the clergy staff. The vestry was evenly divided on endorsing my choice. For the first and only time in forty years as a parish priest, I broke a tie vote in favor of her call. To me it was a no-brainer, but there was hell to pay. While some parishioners rejoiced, others canceled their pledges.

As I observed this woman’s ministry, I became even more convinced that the ordination of women was a pastoral imperative. I began to notice that there were some things people were more likely to tell a female priest than a male one: embarrassing personal failings, intimate marriage problems, etc. When I asked a psychologist why this might be so, the therapist ventured that, for some people, it is “safe to tell mother but not to tell father.”

Which brings me to the question: why is it such an issue to call women priests “Mother”? Frankly, I would prefer that we call all priests by their first names. But, if we call men “Father” I think we do well to call women “Mother.” Both are warm terms of respect, at least in my book. Then again — unlike some people — I had two parents who left me with good associations for the terms “father” and “mother.” They taught me to be a good “father” and — even though both were lifelong Baptists — a good “Father” as well. In fact they raised two Episcopal “Fathers.” My brother David also is an Episcopal priest. Both our portraits in full clericals were proudly displayed by our parents above their mantelpiece.

When our mother died, at ninety-three years of age, David said, “We’re orphans now.” I felt the same way. How many people can be counted on to love you no matter what, inspire you with their generosity, and bring you pants when you desperately need them?



The Rev. Fred Fenton lives in Concord, California, with his wife Billie. They have three grown sons and three granddaughters and have been married fifty-six years. Fred is an avid reader and enjoys writing. He regularly tries, usually without success, to beat his wife at *Scrabble*. They live with two Tibetan Spaniels, Brandy and Bailey. Fred can be reached at fentons925@sbcglobal.net.