

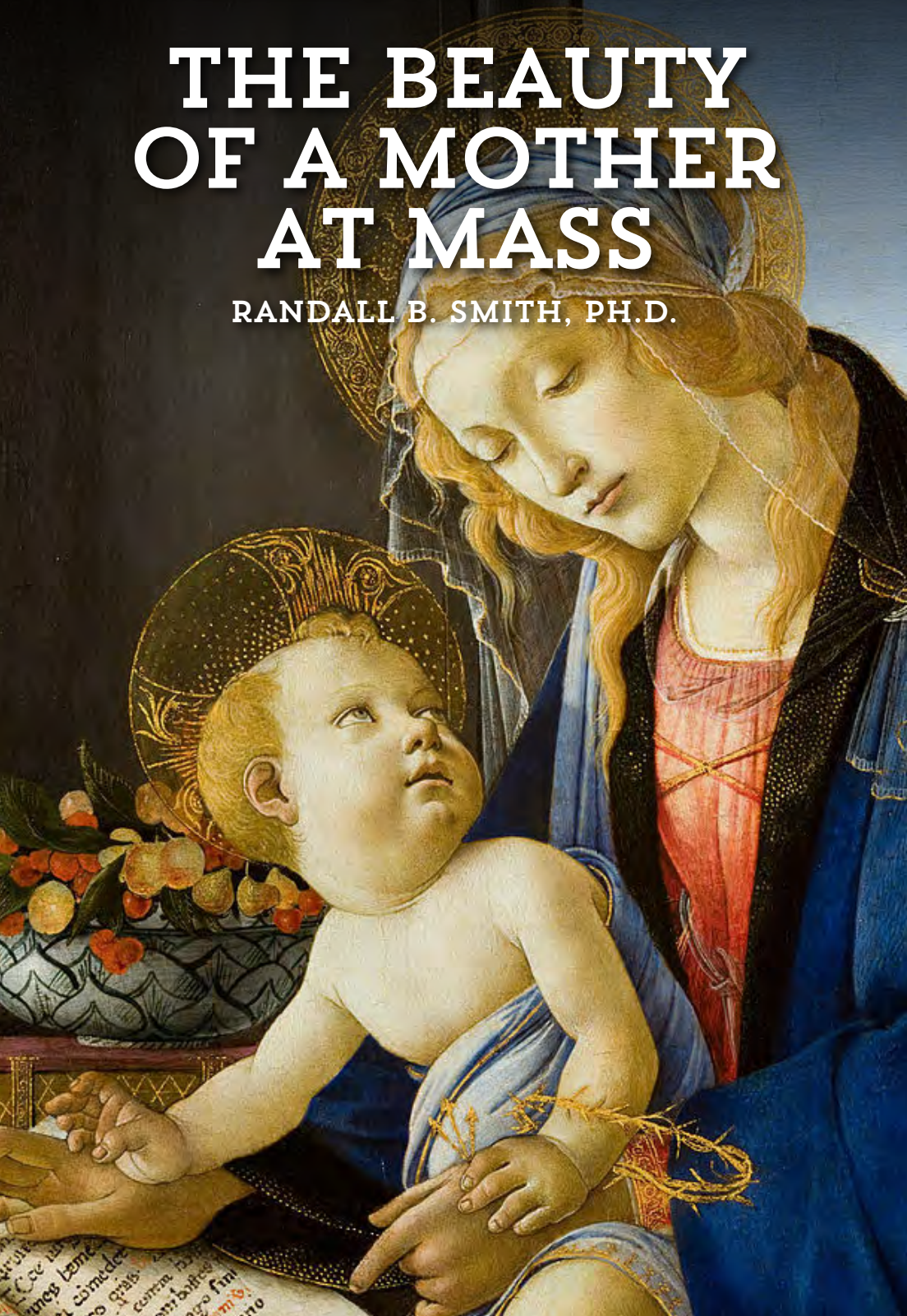
FAITH MATTERS

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THE BEAUTY OF A MOTHER AT MASS

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I have seen the Yellow Mountains in China, and they are very beautiful. I have looked across the valley of Jackson Hole, Wyoming, in the evening at the snow-capped peaks of the Grand Tetons, and they were very beautiful. But there are few things in the world quite as beautiful as a mother rocking her child gently at Mass.

Beauty is surprising. It comes upon you unexpectedly. You look up and are struck suddenly by inexplicable beauty, something ineffable but real, like walking around a corner in the mountains and looking out on an unexpected vista.

I had that experience the other day at Mass. A mother a few pews up was rocking her two-year-old son back and forth as she quietly sang the *Agnus Dei*. She gazed into his eyes as she sang the words, as if she were simultaneously singing to him and to God. In the midst of what can be, even in the best of Masses, the hustle and bustle of liturgy – which prayer? which book? standing, sitting or kneeling? – there was peace: a mother and her child “at the still point of the turning world.”

Don't get me wrong; I am not unaware that this sort of divine peace is not exactly the most common state of affairs when parents are dealing with young children. We needn't over-romanticize the image of a mother and

her child the way some baroque paintings of Mary and the child Jesus tend to do. I do not mean to be overly critical of these paintings, although I tend to prefer earlier artistic renderings more; it is simply that we don't want to give a false picture of the sort of chaos parenting often involves.

And yet it is precisely for this reason, it seems to me, that we find those moments of peace and calm that are shared between mother and child so reassuring and so beautiful. At the still point of the turning world, there is love. Love can be expressed in a potentially infinite number of ways, but when we see it, palpably present and undeniable, these are moments of pure beauty worth savoring.

When I said that few things in the world are quite as beautiful as a mother rocking her child gently at Mass, I did not mean to set up an invidious comparison; it is not a competition. Love created all those beautiful things. But among the many beautiful things we find around us in the world if we take the time to look – mountains, beaches, oceans – only human beings can look back into the face of their Creator with love.

What should not cease to fill us with wonder about parenthood is that, as human beings, we are allowed to participate as co-creators with God in a special



way. Other animals procreate the species, but how many have been given the privilege of doing so freely, as an act not merely of instinct or primal urge, but of understanding and love?

It is not uncommon for our hearts to be softened when we see images of mothers and their offspring, even when they are members of another species, whether it is a dog suckling her pups or a mare nudging her newborn foal to take those first faltering steps. This is the miracle of new life.

But human children have the privilege of something more. They can look back into the face of their mothers with love. And in this way, they are prepared to look back into the face of their God with love. We raise them up not only to sing like birds, but to sing those songs to God in love. Such is the beauty of watching a mother singing prayers gently and staring into her child's eyes at Mass.

There is pain in childbirth as there are constant challenges raising children in the midst of our chaotic world with evils, both

internal and external, lurking around every corner. But when all of that noise is quieted, what we catch a glimpse of is the primordial love that created the universe and continues to hold it together through the ages.

I teach my students about the Trinity and the eternal communion of love shared between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. What I do is talk about the Trinity. But to know it, they must experience it. And so, for most of them, they won't really know what the Church is talking about until they join with another person in that full gift of themselves to each other we call marriage, and through that union produce a third, who is an incarnation of their mutual gift of love.

It is possible, of course, that they might already have seen this selfless gift of spouses to one another and to a child at some point in their lives. Perhaps they even understood their own existence in this way, seeing their life as an embodiment of the mutual love of their parents, although this experience is becoming increasingly rare in our society.

“The sacrament of matrimony is wider than family,” says the great orthodox theologian Alexander Schmemmann. “It is the sacrament of divine love, as

the all-embracing mystery of being itself, and it is for this reason that it concerns the whole Church, and—through the Church—the whole world.” Mankind’s sin is not only that he has disobeyed God, but that he no longer sees “his whole life depending on the whole world as a sacrament of communion with God.” Thus the real human tragedy, says Schmemmann, is living a “noneucharistic life in a noneucharistic world.”

Mothers remind us of the Incarnation and thus of the fact that at our origins, we were an embodiment of God’s love, meant to live a sacramental, eucharistic life in a sacramental, eucharistic world. We should be grateful to God for them. God could have sprouted us out of a pod. It would have been easier for women, but not better for the world.





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