

On Being a Midwife

I chose this rather unusual topic because it might teach us something vital which is missing in today's society. It pertains to childbirth...the very act of coming into physical existence...and therefore touches us all by reason of being alive. Rightly do we attribute special allegiance to our mothers for having brought us into the world. Our fathers are just as responsible but lack that maternal intimacy. Apart from them there's a class of people known as midwives who may have assisted at our births. Chances are pretty certain that they remain anonymous, though in some instances their names may be in medical records or are associated with a family over an extended period of time.

Medically speaking, a midwife is a person who is 'mid-way' between the wife (the woman actually giving physical birth) and the child exiting her womb. The essence of this profession is revealed by the first half of the word ('mid') which is another way of saying that it exists between two states, the unborn and the born or more accurately, the transition from the former into the latter. Despite her critical skills, a midwife is secondary to the drama unfolding. All eyes are focused upon the mother and infant. Because a midwife is responsible for the safe delivery of a child, she seems to have a knack for the job; one can say that such a person is born with this facility rather than having acquired it. By necessity the profession bars men since they don't bring children into the world. During the birth process they are reduced to passive agents, almost helpless lookers-on, if you will. Once the child has exited the womb, has been given a preliminary check-over, the midwife's job is immediately (and rightly) subsumed by the mother. However, this doesn't preclude that we can apply the image of a midwife to those areas of life where we all—women and men—are giving birth to new forms of life. What I wish to stress here is in addition to the 'mid-ness' of the midwife, she fades into the background shortly after birth. If the midwife were to hang around and assume the mothers responsibilities, she would be perceived at least as an unwelcome guest and at most as an usurper.

The question this raises is: How do we assume the proper role at giving birth—whether spiritual, philosophical or advisory—and more importantly, when do we know when its time to step back? The New Testament image *par excellence* is John the Baptist. His primary and most famous identification is 'a voice crying in the wilderness' [Jn 1.23]. Here John stands in the shadow of the prophet Isaiah, as it were, who uttered these famous words. Several verses earlier (vs. 8) John the Evangelist quickly puts him into his proper perspective minus any words from the Baptist himself: 'He was not the light but came to bear witness to the light.' Actually St. Johns Gospel (as well as the other three) is loaded with images of the Baptists preparatory role for Jesus Christ. As soon as Jesus comes on the scene, John is quick to disappear into the background. Even more significantly, he does this on his own volition. All this is great stuff but has become very familiar to those of us who've grown up with these images in mind. Sometimes members of the Church in their zeal are quick to identify with the Baptist's role as herald. They get caught up in that all too human and familiar tendency to steal the limelight from Jesus Christ. Not that they can effect this but are quick to milk this role for all its worth. That would resemble a midwife wanting to hang around after the birth at which she assisted. Her skill was vital but now has faded away until her services are required.

A quick note with reference to John the Baptist as herald of the light...The Icelandic term for

midwife is *ljósmóður* which literally translates as 'light mother.' In other words, this person is responsible for bringing a newborn into the light.

Perhaps second only to John the Baptist, the best example of a midwife...a *ljósmóður*...is the person of Socrates. While the former may have wider, popular appeal, the latter is just as important if not more so. Socrates offers us a living example of how any person can engage in the pursuit of philosophy as a way of life. Knowing the ropes of that trade is vital to an understanding of theology. We have to resist the temptation to rush by philosophy, as it were, as though it were secondary (in the sense of being inferior) and get into theology. That's equivalent to putting the cart before the horse, a temptation more common than at first glance. The impetus of jotting down these brief thoughts about the crucial though overlooked role midwifery stems from this concern. While considerable interest in spirituality is grabbing all the attention, knowing what's involved requires a lot of thought, especially when it comes to seeking assistance from other persons. That's why an understanding about midwifery is crucial, for it helps eliminate unnecessary grief.

The foremost image of a midwife's art is found in one of Plato's Dialogues entitled Theaetetus. It is there that Socrates himself lays out in clear, no uncertain terms what this job is really like. A read of his matter-of-fact account dispels any romantic notions we may entertain about the job. Like John the Baptist, it requires that we assume a secondary role while allowing the primary characters to do their thing. Aspiring to be a midwife is noble but another thing to put into practice; we wish to be in the limelight when we should fade into the background. Socrates uses a hidden irony which is more accessible than the stern, religious figure of John the Baptist. For example, Socrates uses the verb *basanizo* or 'to test' which fundamentally means 'to rub, examine closely' with respect to the offspring. It's a rather harsh word, quite unappealing to anyone who undertakes the profession of midwifery. Try imagining yourself submitting to this 'rubbing'...not in the sense of undergoing a massage but more like being rubbed by rough sandpaper. At the same time Socrates is up front in telling you—and this is at the delivery of your child—that he is *agnos*, literally 'not-producing' when it comes to what we desire most, wisdom (*sophia*). The root of this 'not-producing' is Socrates proclivity to 'always ask questions' and never to express his own views. On the other hand, John the Baptist is sure of his role as precursor and is, of course, of a different order. However, he isn't that different to be at odds with Socrates, only complementary to him...a kind of archetype proper to spirituality whereas Socrates is an archetype proper to philosophic inquiry.

With that in mind, I present two sections: 1) quotes pertaining to John the Baptist from the Gospels of Saints Matthew and John respectively and 2) the text pertaining to Socrates and the art of midwifery. The second grouping has key Greek terms along with several brief observations. These, like the Gospel verses, are marked off by brackets and underlined in order to distinguish them from the rest of the text. After the text has been expanded in this fashion, we may see how the art of midwifery applies to us some two thousand years later. As of this writing, no further comments are needed. Perhaps some may be added at a later date. As far as I know...and I haven't yet checked this out...this notion of midwife is not developed among the Church Fathers, but that requires closer examination.

John the Baptist

-In those days came John the Baptist preaching in the wilderness leremos: akin to Socrates being

barren] (Mt 3.1).

-Repent [metanoeo, literally, 'to turn about'], for the kingdom of heaven is at hand [eggizo: to draw near] (Mt 3.2).

-The voice of one crying in the wilderness; prepare [etoimazo: referring to the custom of leveling the road before royalty] the way of the Lord, make his paths straight (Mt 3.3).

-Bear fruit that befits [axios: worthy of] repentance [metanoia: cf. metanoeo, 'repent'] (Mt 3.8).

-But he who is coming after me is mightier [ischuroteros] than I (Mt 8.11).

-I need to be baptized by you (Mt 8.14). A protestation by John who then submits.

-To fulfill [pleroo] all righteousness (Mt 8.15). Here dikaioisune requires John to submit to this despite his protestations.

-Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness [eremos: cf. above where John dwelt] (Mt 4.1). This intimates Jesus left John as soon as righteousness was fulfilled] (Mt 4.1).

-Now when he heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew into Galilee (Mt 4.12). This withdrawal occurred right after Jesus' temptation which was preceded by his baptism.

-Can the wedding guests mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them (Mt 9.15)? This intimates that John is not the bridegroom although he is still present.

-Are you he who is to come or shall we look for [prosdokao: in the sense of expecting] another (Mt 11.3)?

-Among those born of women there has risen no one greater than John the Baptist; yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he (Mt 11.11).

-And when Jesus heard this (John's beheading), he withdrew from there in a boat to a lonely place [eis eremon: cf. above where John dwelt] apart (Mt 14.13).

-Elijah does come, and he is to restore [apokathistemi: return to a former state of things] all things...then the disciples understood that he was speaking to them of John the Baptist (Mt 17.12-13).

-He (John) was not the light but came to bear witness [martureo] to the light (Jn 1.8).

-After me comes a man who ranks before [emprosthen: preposition] me, for he was before [protos: adjective] me (Jn 1.30).

-I myself do not know him; but he who sent me to baptize with water said to me... (Jn 1.33). No clear identity of whom spoke to John, presumably God the Father.

-You yourselves bear me witness [martureo] that I have said I am not the Christ but I have been sent before [emprosthen: adverb; cf. above] him (Jn 3.28).

-He was a burning [kaiomenos] and shining [phainon] lamp, and you were willing to rejoice for a while in his light [phos] (Jn 5.35).

-John did not sign [semeion], but everything that John said about this man was true (Jn 10.41).

Theaetetus 149b-151a:

Socrates: They say it was Artemis [daughter of Zeus and brother of Apollo; goddess of fertility and the hunt whose companions were virgins] who was responsible [aitia: a noun for 'cause.'] for this custom (i.e., midwifery); it was because she, who undertook the patronage of childbirth [loxeia], was herself childless [aloxos: partner of one's bed, wife, concubine. Also someone who is unwedded]. She didn't, it's true, entrust the duties of midwifery [maieuomai; noun is maias] to barren women [steriphos: also as firm, solid with the connotation of solidity], because human nature [phusis] is too weak [asthenesteros] to acquire skill [techne] where it has no experience [apeiros: unacquainted, ignorant]. But she assigned the task [prostasso: in the sense of giving a command] to those who

have become incapable of child-bearing [atokos: barren] through age [helikia: prime of one's life, youth]-honoring their likeness [homoiotēs] to herself.

Theaetetus: Naturally [eikos: reasonable].

Socrates: And this too is very natural [eikos], isn't it?—or perhaps necessary [anagkaion]? I mean that it is the midwives who can tell [gignosko: to perceive, determine] better than anyone else whether women are pregnant [kuo] or not.

Theaetetus: Yes, of course.

Socrates: And then it is the midwives who have the power [egeiro: to rouse; used with didomai: to give, bestow] to bring on the pains [odis], and also, if they think fit, to relieve them [malthakizomai: to relax]; they do it by the use of simple drugs [pharmakia], and by singing incantations [epaeido: by means of charms]. In difficult cases, too, they can bring about the birth or if they consider it advisable, they can promote a miscarriage [amblisko].

Theaetetus: Yes, that is so.

Socrates: There's another thing too. Have you noticed [aisthanomai: to perceive, often by senses] this about them, that they are the cleverest [deinos: also, fearful, marvelous] of match-makers [promnestria: a woman who courts for another], because they are marvelously knowing [massophos: all-knowing, wise] about the kind of couples whose marriage will produce the best [aristos: often in the moral sense; noble] children?

Theaetetus: No, that is not all familiar to me.

Socrates: But they are far prouder [phroneo: to be wise, prudent] of this, believe me, than of cutting the umbilical cord [omphaletomia]. Think [ennoeo: to reflect or form a notion] now. There's an art [techne: skill, as above] which is concerned with the cultivation [therapeia: fostering, tending, nurturing] and harvesting of the crops. Now is it the same art [to gignoskein: cf gignosko above, 'the knowing'] which prescribes the best soil for planting or sowing a given crop? Or is it a different one?

Theaetetus: No, it is all the same art.

Socrates: Then applying this to women, will there be one art of the sowing and another of the harvesting?

Theaetetus: That doesn't seem likely, certainly.

Socrates: No, it doesn't. But there is also an unlawful [adikos: unjust] and unscientific [atechnos: cf techne above] practice of bringing men and women together [sunagoge], which we call procuring [proagogia: pandering which involves a pimp]; and because of that the midwives—a most august [semnos: revered] body of women—are very reluctant [pheugo: to flee] to undertake even lawful matchmaking [promnestike: cf promnestria above]. They are afraid that if they practice this, they may be suspected of the other [aitia: cause; used with empipto, to fall into]. Any yet, I suppose, reliable [ontos: adverb, really; from eimai, to be] matchmaking is a matter for no one but the true [orthos: adverb, rightly, correctly] midwife.

Theaetetus: Apparently [phaino: to appear].

Socrates: So the work of the midwives is a highly important one; but it is not so important as my own performance [drama: act, deed]. And for this reason, that there is not in midwifery [gunaixis] the further complication, that the patients are sometimes delivered of phantoms [eidolon: also, image] and sometimes of realities [alethinōs], and that the two are hard to distinguish [diagignosko]. If there were, then the midwife's greatest and noblest [kalliston: beautiful] function [ergon] would be to distinguish the true [alethes] from the false offspring—don't you agree?

Theaetetus: Yes, I do.

Socrates: Now my art [techne: see above] of midwifery is [huparcho: to come into being, to be

proper] just like theirs in most respects. The difference is that I attend [maieuomai] men and not women, and that I watch over [episkopeo: to inspect, regard] the labor [tikto: to beget] of their souls [psuche], not of their bodies [soma]. And the most important thing about my art is the ability to apply all possible tests [basanizo: fundamentally, 'to rub,' to examine closely] to the offspring, to determine whether the young mind [dianoia: thought, intention, purpose] is being delivered of a phantom [eidolon: cf above], that is, an error [pseudos], or a fertile truth [gonimon kai alethes]. For one thing which I have in common [huparcho: cf above] with the ordinary midwives is that I myself am barren [agonos: not-producing] of wisdom [sophia]. The common reproach [oneidos: blame, censure] against me is that I am always asking questions [ero] of other people but never express my own views [apophaino: to represent, show by reason, give an account] about anything, because there is no wisdom [agonos: cf above as 'barren,' sophias] in me; and that is true enough. And the reason [aitia: cf above] of it is this, that God [ho theos: lower case theta in Greek, 'the god'] compels [anagkazo] me to attend [maieuomai: cf above] to the travail of others, but has forbidden me to procreate [genna: birth]. So that I am not in any sense a wise man [sophos]; I cannot claim as the child [ekgonos: descendant, sprung from] of my own soul [psuche] any discovery [eurema: invention, something found unexpectedly] worth the name of wisdom [not in Greek text]. But with those who associate [suggignomai: to hold converse, be with] with me it is different. At first some of them may give the impression [phaino: cf above] of being ignorant and stupid [panu amatheis: literally, 'all unlearned']; but as time goes on and our association [sunousia: being with] continues, all whom God [ho theos: cf above] permits [pareiko: allows] are seen to make progress [proiemi: to send before, drive forward, abandon]—a progress which is amazing [thaumastos] both to other people and to themselves. And yet it is clear that this is not due to anything they have learned [manthano: cf amatheis above] from me; it is that they discover [eurisko] within themselves [par' auton: connotes 'besides'] a multitude of beautiful things [polla kai kala], which they bring forth [tikto: to beget] into the light. But it is I, with God's [ho theos: cf above] help [aitios: being the cause, responsible], who delivers [maieuomai: cf above] them of this offspring. And a proof of this may be seen in the many cases where people who did not realize [agnoeo: not to perceive] this fact took all the credit to themselves [aiteo: to cause; cf aitia above] and thought that I was no good [kataphroneo: to despise]. They have proceeded to leave me sooner than they should, either of their own accord or through the influence [peitho: to persuade] of others. And after they have gone away from me they have resorted to harmful company [dia poneran sunousian], with the result that what remained within them has miscarried [exemblosan]; while they have neglected [kakos trephontes literally, 'nourishing badly']: the children I helped them to bring forth, and lost them, because they set more value upon lies [pseude] and phantoms [eidolon: cf above] than upon the truth; finally they have been set down for ignorant fools [amatheis: cf above], both by themselves and by everybody else...There is another point also in which those who associate [suggignomai: cf above] with me are like women in child-birth. They suffer the pains of labor [odino: to be in travail], and are filled day and night with distress [aporia: perplexity, being at a loss]; indeed they suffer far more than women. And this pain my art [techne] is able to bring on [egeiro: to awaken rouse], and also to allay [apopauo: to cease, hinder].

Here is a quick list of key points from Plato's Theaetetus:

-Childless Artemis: assigned the task of midwifery not to barren women but to those incapable of child-bearing, i.e., those who are like her.

- The reason: human nature is too weak to acquire skill in areas where it lacked experience.
- Such midwives can tell whether women are pregnant or not.
- Midwives: clever match-makers because they know which couples will produce the best children. Though not mentioned in the text, this intimates a midwife knows about the husband either directly or through his wife. Midwives prouder of this than cutting umbilical cord.
- Socrates' art is more important than that of the midwife: he watches over the labor of souls, not bodies.
- Most important part of Socrates' art: to test whether a young mind is being delivered of a phantom (i.e., error) or fertile truth.
- Socrates has this in common with midwives: barren of wisdom.
- Reproach to Socrates: always asking questions but never expresses own views because he lacks wisdom.
- Reason for lack of wisdom: God compelled him to attend travail of others, not to procreate. Thus Socrates can't claim wisdom as a child of his own soul.
- But it's different with those who associate with Socrates. Their progress is a discovery within themselves of beautiful things, and Socrates delivers them of this offspring.
- Lots of people took credit for their own birth and thought Socrates to be no good. They left him, resorted to bad company, and what was left in them miscarried.
- The children Socrates brought forth were lost because they set more value upon lies and phantoms than truth.
- People associating with Socrates: suffer labor pains worse than women in labor, but Socrates' art both brings on and allays (these pains).