

Purify Her Uncleanness

First Things Online

December 11, 2012

Carrie Frederick Frost

“O Master, Lord Almighty . . . Do Thou Thyself heal also this handmaid, [Name,] who today has given birth and raise her from the bed on which she lies . . . purify her from uncleanness . . . cleanse her from bodily uncleanness and the various afflictions of her womb.”

“Purify her . . . from every sin and from every defilement . . . and let her to be counted worthy to partake, uncondemned, of Thy Holy Mysteries . . . Wash away her bodily and spiritual uncleanness.”

These words come from the Orthodox Christian childbearing rites contained in the liturgical handbook, the *Great Book of Needs*. The first few lines are from “Prayers on the First Day after a Woman has Given Birth to a Child,” or the “First Day” prayers, which are prayed by a priest at a new mother’s bedside soon after birth. The last few lines are from “Prayers for a Woman on the Fortieth Day of Childbirth,” or the “Churching” prayers, which are said when a woman first returns to church with her newborn.

The suggestions about the mother—defiled, unclean, unworthy—jar modern ears. They chafe against the developed-world understanding of childbirth as a healthy and natural biological process that has nothing to do with purity. The situation of these rites among the Orthodox in the United States is varied: Often they are abandoned entirely, some priests change them on the fly, sometimes these rites are celebrated in the tongue of the old country so the exclusively English-speaking mother simply does not have to hear them. Occasionally these rites are being explained, but in wildly inconsistent ways.

Rites can and should make demands on the faithful, so those of us who are piqued by this language must determine if the reason for our reaction is our preference for comfort and ease over hermeneutical effort. We must ask, then, is this concept of impurity after childbirth theologically sound?

It is often assumed that these rites are directly linked to the rites after childbirth found in Leviticus that ban a woman from the temple for a certain number of days and dictate the necessary offerings required for cleansing. Ritual impurity in the ancient world did not constitute a sinful state, but rather a special and contagious ritual state from which one must recover by performing dictated actions. Childbirth was understood as impure not because of the sinfulness of childbearing, but because all experiences which brought one into contact with God’s creative powers, especially female blood—both postpartum and menstrual—were taboo. This understanding was part of the strict division in the ancient world, among the Jews and the pagans, between the sacred and the profane, and this sort of impurity demanded ritual remediation not only to cleanse the impurity from the individual, but also to restore order and maintain God’s favor for the community at large.

Mary, the Mother of God herself, underwent the Mosaic rite of purification, as we hear early in the Gospel of Luke. Yet there is no textual link between the Jewish and Christian purification rites. The oldest extant copies of the Orthodox purification rite, or “Churching,” are from the eighth century, and they do not contain any prayers for the mother whatsoever, but are instead focused entirely on the child. It is only later, in the twelfth century, that the prayers for the mother, which include the impurity theme, were incorporated. The First Day rite was an even later addition, first appearing in the fourteenth century.

The introduction of the Levitical concept of impurity to Orthodox childbearing rites was probably spurred by pagan superstitions about childbirth that were in the air in the late Byzantine period. This likely was not a simple resurrection of the Levitical concept, but instead a new and direct association formed between childbirth and sin.

In the West the rite of the purification of the mother appeared first, around the eleventh century, and was followed later by prayers for the child. This rite remained largely consistent in both the Anglican and Catholic Churches. It fell into disuse in the twentieth century, although it remains in many prayer books. In the case of the Catholic Church, in the wake of Vatican II a truncated blessing for the mother was introduced into the baptismal service for the baby, in lieu of the full Churching.

It is significant that the impurity language was a late addition to the rite in the East. Yet even if the rite were continuous since the earliest days of Christianity, the question would still stand: Are there valid categories of ritual impurity around childbirth, or did Christ cast all categories of purity and impurity into the sphere of free will, into the choice between vice and virtue?

Opinion is mixed. Some Fathers interpreted Old Testament purity symbolically; they understood Levitical categories of purity and impurity to represent virtue and sin. St. John Chrysostom went so far as to specifically say in reference to childbirth, “Those things are not polluted which arise from nature . . . but those which arise from choice.” On the other hand, other Church Fathers understood all Levitical categories as symbolic except those having to do with sex and childbirth.

The law of the Church is mixed as well: some documents implore women to go to church during times of bleeding, menstrual or postpartum; whereas other canon law strictly prohibits women from receiving communion on the grounds of perceived impurity.

Christ himself transformed Levitical practice many times, most notably in his encounter with the woman with the issue of blood. Jesus Christ let her touch him, he healed her, and he acknowledged her. In this way it appears that he eschewed the Levitical understanding of impurity having to do with a woman’s blood. Here and elsewhere in the Gospels, Christ shifted categories of Levitical purity into the realm of the free will.

St. Paul also abandoned the Levitical approach to the Law regarding impurity, except out of cases of charity. Indeed, he repeatedly emphasized that the new human has put on Christ, and that any impurity has been left behind by baptism: “You were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and in the Spirit of our God.”

For Paul, baptism was the ultimate purification, after which none was needed. Given Paul's understanding of baptism, a new mother cannot be temporarily suspended from her purification. To suggest so undermines the potency of the sacrament of baptism.

And yet, these concepts were introduced into the childbearing rites in the second millennium, and there they remain. The situation of these rites takes on urgency with the acknowledgement that these words are almost always the very first *and the very last* words a woman hears on the theological meaning of motherhood from the Orthodox Church. This is a tragedy in and of itself, beyond just the unsound concepts of impurity contained in these rites, but it is still all the more reason to consider altering them.

Although they contain these unsound references to impurity, these rites cannot and should not be reduced to this language; there are many other theological concepts present. In celebrating these rites, the Orthodox Church offers liturgical hospitality to new mothers and their children. It acknowledges the glory that is a new life born into this world and the constant hope we all have for our own rebirth into the next. This is no small thing. In a culture confused about parenthood and childbirth, many other Christian churches that make no liturgical acknowledgment of these events.

The purity language included in these Orthodox childbearing rites does not merely jar the sensitive modern ear; it jars the Christian ear. It is not a "women's issue," but a *cosmic* issue having everything to do with who we are as human persons in light of Christ, as well as with our understanding of baptism. We should reexamine these rites, then, with the goal of throwing out the bathwater and the bathwater only.

Carrie Frederick Frost is a cradle Orthodox Christian and a scholar of Orthodox theology who lives with her husband and five children in Charlottesville, Virginia.