CHRJST, 0M MWUR-

AN EXPERIMENTAL THOUGHT

H. Paul Santmire

Along with the task of getting our society and our Church liberated, we have to work on our thinking, too. We very much do need a black theology such as the one James Cone has been talking about. Likewise, we also are very much in need of a female theology such as the one Mary Daly has been calling for. Our theology, no less than our praxis, has to be liberated, for Jesus* sake.

This essay, I hope, represents one little step in that direction. It is more female in tone than black, but if it works, I think that it may have ramifications for black thinking as well. The thought began to take shape when I, a male Chaplain at a women's Institution, unexpectedly found myself with a sermon to preach on '"Mother's Day." My first reaction was to bracket the whole thing. I could easily steer clear of that holiday of American civil religion and talk about "the War" or "Celebration" or some other theme near and dear to my homilettcal heart. But, for reasons which I still don't fully understand, my thoughts kept returning again and again to Mother's Day. And, behold, I suddenly found myself thinking a liberated thought (I think).

Clearly the "momism" of American civil religion had to be rejected. That just has too many overly sweet odors, like the room freshener in the aerosol can: the homi-ness of Ladies Home Journal, the mindlessness of the stereotypical suburban housewife, the one-sided maternalism preached by Dr. Spock, and so on. But the sophisticated academic counterpart of the popular momism had to go too. This is perhaps best exemplified in Erik Erikson's

celebrated article, "Women and Inner Space.'* As I have learned in recent years, Erikson isn't without his blindspots^ when it comes to typing the sexes. In some contexts, apparently, men are the ones with the dominant sense of inner space. So this business of identifying sex traits and then setting women apart Is a risky, not to say perilous, undertaking.

Weary of these nomlst motifs from the civil religion, then, for a moment I considered being avante garde ecumenical. As a Protestant preacher I would celebrate Mary as Mother of the Church! Some of my brethren, like Herbert Richardson, have been making noises recently that this is the thing to do. But, nota bene, some of my brethren! Nowhere among my students, many of whom are quite sophisticated theologically, had I noted a ground wwell for Mary. Indeed, I thought, wasn't it somehow significant that, traditionally speaking, celebrate male theologians found it so Important to celebrate the Mother of God! Then I remembered an observation by Mary Daly: that throughout its history the Church has exalted the stereotypically feminine virtues, inwardness, compassion, and so on, while it has characteristically practiced the stereotypically masculine virtues, aggressiveness, domination, and manipulation. How many sweet love-your-neighbor Christians have secretly, even openly, rejoiced in the abomination of American firepower in Vietnam?! It simply will not do to exalt womanly compassion in our preaching and theology, and then to sing "Onward Christian Soldiers, Marching Off to War" in our hearts. We may need a new or revived Mariology, then, but not before some more fundamental points have been made.

So I decided to develop the theme Christ as Mother of the Church. And that's the experimental thought that I want to present here. I know that this image stretches the mind somewhat, and that it doesn't sound very biblical. But these, I think, are precisely its advantages. On the one

hand, by merging the Images of Son of God and Mother of the Church we can get out of the dead alley of those fruitless discussions about male and female characteristics, which discussions tend to land us in the bind Identified above, celebrating the "feminine," practicing the "masculine." The image of Christ as mother suggests that the deepest traits of the Church are not stereotypically feminine or masculine, but something else, something resembling a child or an Infant; in Norman 0. Brown's terms, something polymorphous. In Christ, after all, as the Apostle says, there is neither male nor female.

On the other hand, the image of Christ as mother of the Church also helps us to overcome what I take to be an unfortunate dominance of Pauline Image In the history of the Church's thinking about itself. This is the image of Christ as head of the Church or, in an only slightly different form, Christ as husband of the Church. I want to elaborate this point for a moment.

Paul presents us with a cephalized model of the Church. Christ is the head. Christ is the dominating, regulating, intellectual center. In practice this image led to a hierarchical understanding of the Church, and other elements in Paul's thought, above all his so-called "Christ mysticism'* were we or less suppressed. This cephalized, hierarchical approach to the Church came to its greatest flowering, of course, in the High Middle Ages. The Church of the Middle Ages, dominated by the Roman pontlf, was a facile expression of the Pauline image. The Pope is the vicar of Christ, and therefore the Pope is the head of the Church. Authority and truth emanate from this one center. Roma locuta, causa finite est.

This cephalized model brings with it, clearly, a thoroughgoing externality. Authority and truth are imposed from above, from the head. That is the legacy,