



Towards Theology of Parenthood: Mother Mary as the Role Model for Sensitive and Secure Christian Parenting

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Abstract: Mother Mary's intimate and confidential relationship with God has inspired Christians around the world for the last two millennia. Her role in salvation history has already been discussed in detail in various church documents and scholarly literature. However, from an interdisciplinary point of view, her maternal role has not yet been fully evaluated from a psychological and child-rearing perspective. Therefore, in this article, we conduct a psychological analysis of the Gospel passages that talk about her maternal role and we evaluate these passages through the prism of the well-established attachment theory. Despite temporal and cultural differences, Mary's maternal attitude is found to be highly consistent with the key findings in research on quality parenting and interpersonal relationships. As we show, her "maternal genius" is revealed through the following fundamental characteristics of attachment-focused parenting: unconditional acceptance, sensitive guidance, compassionate accompaniment and continuous emotional regulation. These characteristics of Mary's motherhood come to the fore especially in the key moments of salvation history. The psychological analysis of Mary's motherhood brings an important contribution to the "aggiornamento" of Mariology and enables some new opportunities for pastoral theology. With new scientifically supported insights, the Church will be better equipped to help parents to discover the beauty and depth of the mission of parenthood, following Mary's example. The findings of our research therefore also represent an important foundation for the emerging theology of parenthood.

Keywords: Mother Mary, sensitive parenting, attachment-focused parenting, psychological analysis, Mary's maternal genius, theology of parenthood

Mary is not just one among other women of Scripture but a unique figure who plays an essential role in salvation history. Mary's response to God, her "yes," and the Incarnation are the culmination of the relationship God initiated with Israel through Abraham. Mary's "yes" represents the pinnacle of Israel's faith (McKenna 2020, 11). At the moment of consent, Mary becomes the personification of Israel, and as the Mother of the Lord, she also becomes the personal concretization of the Church. In her unconditional and trusting collaboration with God, the most profound spiritual content of the Covenant that God wishes to establish with His people is most deeply expressed (Ratzinger 1988, 75). The closest connection between God and humanity, placed at the very center of salvation history, is realized through Mary's acceptance of the maternal role. Therefore, it is not surprising that since ancient times, Mary has inspired Christian girls, women, mothers, and especially women consecrated to God (Chmielewski 2023, 152). The Greco-Roman heritage has accustomed humanity to

a certain feminine status and ideal, thus facilitating its acceptance of the Marian cult (Zawadzki 2021, 1053). In the earliest extensive biographical account of the Virgin Mary, attributed to Maximus the Confessor in the 7th century, maternal compassion for her suffering son takes center stage, fostering devotion to the veneration of Jesus' suffering (Avsenik Nabergoj 2022, 831). Furthermore, in the Church reform of the 11th century, Peter Damian relied on Mariology and Marian devotion, seeing in the Mother of God a reference point for Christian life to which the Church must constantly return. Similar to the early Church Fathers in the first centuries, he recognized the significant role that God had assigned to Mary in salvation history, thus naming her the "new Eve" (Królikowski 2022, 76).

The role of Mary in the economy of salvation is also emphasized in contemporary Church documents. The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church highlights the role of the blessed Mother in the economy of salvation, seeing in her the fulfillment of the feminine line in salvation history, so that just as a woman contributed to death, so also a woman should contribute to life (LG 55–56). For Paul VI, Mary is not only an example for the whole Church but is also, clearly, a teacher of the spiritual life for individual Christians. Mary is above all the example of that worship that consists in making one's life an offering to God (MC 21). Pope John Paul II, in the apostolic letter *Mulieris Dignitatem*, writes that through Mary's motherhood, through her maternal "fiat," God established a New Covenant with the human race. He continues that the motherhood of every woman, understood in the light of the Gospel, expresses a profound "listening to the word of the living God" and a readiness to "safeguard" this Word, which is "the word of eternal life" (MD 19). In the encyclical *Redemptoris Mater*, it is emphasized that Mary was the first to believe. She followed Jesus step by step in her maternal pilgrimage of faith, from the moment of the annunciation and conception until the tragic experience of Golgotha (RM 26). Of the essence of motherhood is the fact that it concerns the person. Mary also established a relationship with her son in her own way, lived maternal love, on which Jesus' development was based and his mission matured (RM 45). Pope Francis encourages parents to draw inspiration from the experience and responses of the holy family in their daily trials. All Christian parents are, like Mary, asked to face their family's challenges with courage and serenity, in good times and bad, and to keep in their heart the great things which God has done (AL 30; 66).

The main aim of our research is to explore the fundamental characteristics of Mary's maternal disposition, which could address and inspire contemporary Christian parents. We want to examine how to understand Mary's maternal attitude, her relationship with her son, her responses, and actions in light of insights from modern psychological concepts, such as attachment theory. Numerous theologians and Church documents have already evaluated her role in salvation history; Pope John Paul II has also spoken in various documents about the "feminine genius," whose fullest expression the Church sees in Mary and finds in her a source of constant

inspiration (Chmielewski 2023, 140). However, less attention has been paid to a thorough psychological analysis of her behavior in the role of mother, which could serve as encouragement and an example to Christian parents in carrying out their parental mission. Evaluating Mary's motherhood through the lens of modern science will assist pastoral theology in working with parents. Pastoral workers will be better equipped to help parents integrate modern insights from psychology, psychotherapy, pedagogy, and neuroscience with the fundamental principles of Christian anthropology, Catholic doctrine, and their own religious experience. Our analysis will thus also represent one of the foundations of the emerging theology of parenthood that we are striving to develop.

1. The Concept of Attachment-Focused Parenting

The theoretical foundation of our psychological analysis of Mary's motherhood is the attachment theory, which we must briefly introduce at this point. Pioneered by John Bowlby (1969) and further elucidated by Mary D. Ainsworth (Ainsworth and Bell 1970), the attachment theory stands as one of the most influential paradigms in modern social science and humanistic inquiry. The original ideas of the pioneers in attachment theory have stood the test of time and provided an exceptionally fruitful foundation for related concepts and numerous studies (Cassidy 2008, 17). Research has confirmed the significance of the parent-child relationship and its crucial impact on the emotional, cognitive, social, communicative, as well as physiological and neurological development of the child (Hughes 2009, 9). It has been demonstrated that the development of a specific type of attachment also entails the formation of a relatively stable and enduring internal working model, representing developmental continuity in attachment patterns from behavioral-experiential to the verbal-representational level (Bretherton and Munholland 2008, 114).

Attachment theory has also strongly influenced the development of psychotherapy in recent years. Some renowned psychotherapeutic modalities see the transformation from insecure to secure attachment as a key to change in the therapeutic process (Hughes 2007; Wallin 2007; Johnson 2019; Furrow et al. 2022). With the increasingly influential process of secularization, Western postmodern society has entered what is known as the "therapeutic era." One characteristic of this era is that individuals attempt to compensate for the lack of meaning in life, traditionally derived from the teachings of Christian faith, by pursuing personal development and enhancing the quality of interpersonal relationships (Svetelj 2022, 174–76). This is evident also in the view of the increasingly vast array of self-help books, emotional and social intelligence development, coping with stress, strengthening interpersonal relationships, achieving personal happiness, and quality child rearing. Among the professional and

scientific literature in the field of parenting and upbringing, we find an increasing number of recognized and influential authors whose theoretical frameworks for understanding parenting are based on attachment theory (Sears and Sears 2001; Siegel and Hartzell 2003; Hughes 2009; Poljanec 2015).

Parental responsiveness, sensitivity to the child's signals, ability for attuned interaction with the child, their physical and emotional availability, as well as recognition and acceptance of the child's needs, are among essential contributors to a child's secure attachment, which plays a pivotal role in shaping his or her long-term developmental outcomes (Erzar and Kompan Erzar 2011, 81–91). For the child's development, intersubjective experiences with parents are crucial. Intersubjectivity between parent and child involves joining a child in his experience, experiencing it with him, matching his affective state, and exploring the experience with him to better make sense of it. They need to share the same affective state, the same focus of awareness or attention, and the same intentions in the present moment (Hughes 2009, 36–38). According to Siegel and Hartzell, secure attachments develop when children experience consistent, emotionally attuned, and responsive communication with their parents. Relationships that offer this kind of responsiveness, especially during times of emotional need, provide children with repeated experiences of feeling connected, understood, and protected. When a parent responds with attunement to their child's needs, the child feels understood and connected. Attuned communication allows the child to develop an internal sense of balance and helps them regulate their bodily states, emotions, and states of mind with flexibility and equilibrium. These experiences of attuned connections and the balance they foster enable the child to develop a sense of coherence within their own mind (Siegel and Hartzell 2003, 103–4). A child's cognitive development is also influenced by how parents respond, their close relationship, and consistently mirroring the child's needs. After all, a relationship that allows for a genuine connection with the child's needs and feelings is where a child thrives most fully (Poljanec 2015, 45).

Key characteristics of attachment-focused parenting include acceptance, curiosity, and empathy (Hughes 2009, 78–95). Acceptance is key to the child's sense of security in the relationship with the parent, so it must be unconditional. A child cannot do anything that would be justifiably unacceptable to the parents. It is necessary to distinguish between evaluation or acceptance of a person and his action, therefore acceptance has nothing to do with permissiveness. Behaviors remain to be evaluated and guided. While parents limit or direct their child's behavior, they should still constantly express their acceptance of the child as a person. Using relationship withdrawal as a means of discipline is a major obstacle to developing a secure attachment (Hughes 2009, 78–80).

Another important characteristic of securely attaching parenting is curiosity. Parents are continuously interested in who their child is, what his character is/will be, his fundamental traits, from conception onwards. They are continuously engaged

in discovering their child, and their ongoing curiosity about him leads them to speculate about his inner life. Due to the nature of intersubjective experience, parents' exploration of the meaning of their infant's features and expressions significantly influences his self-perception. The question of curiosity becomes more challenging as the child grows, and acts of discipline become a necessary part of day-to-day parent-child interactions. A child can usually accept parental authority when it concerns his behavior, as long as it does not attempt to alter his inner life. An attitude of curiosity entails a "not-knowing" stance, prompting the parent to inquire about the child's inner life that led to the particular behaviors of concern. A nonjudgmental, open curiosity about a child's thoughts, feelings, and intentions is likely to foster the child's interest in his own inner life, develop his skills in identifying his thoughts, feelings, and intentions, and encourage honest expression of his inner life (Hughes 2009, 85–89).

Curiosity is closely intertwined with another key element of secure attachment parenting, which is empathy. In early childhood, the parent demonstrates empathy through the use of very clear facial expressions, rhythms, and inflections in her voice, as well as gestures and posture. The infant perceives her empathy through her non-verbal cues that are attuned to his expressions. As the child grows older, his parent also employs words to convey empathy, but these words always carry a distinct non-verbal component that communicates the parent's willingness to share in the child's emotional state. The parent's caring and understanding presence empowers the child to maintain a more confident stance in the face of distress. He feels that he is not alone in his distress, as the parent experiences the child's emotions within herself. Now, the child feels "felt" by his parent and can more easily confront the stress induced by challenging situations. The parent holds a part of it. Her affectively regulated presence facilitates his regulation of any emerging emotion. When a child feels his parent's empathy, he often navigates very difficult situations without succumbing to dysregulation caused by intense emotions. Such experiences of empathy have long-term implications for an individual's relationships throughout life. If someone has experienced empathy from their attachment figures, it is easier for him to extend empathy to others who regard him as an attachment figure (Hughes 2009, 93–95).

2. Mary's Motherhood in the Light of Modern Scientific Findings on Parenting

To the best of our knowledge, Mary's motherhood has not yet been evaluated in light of modern scientific insights from attachment theory, a gap we aim to address in this chapter. An interdisciplinary approach to Mariology necessitates the courage to explore novel perspectives on Mary's role, facilitated through dialogue with other

disciplines. Therefore, we will analyze the Gospel passages that talk about Mary's motherhood from a psychological point of view, specifically from the standpoint of the theory of attachment. As Udo Schnelle notes, the New Testament texts are also suitable for psychological analysis. In them we can find an intertwining of emotions, hopes and longings, as well as different social norms, values and behavioral patterns (2014, 211). By applying psychological analysis, we can enhance our understanding of biblical texts and their relevance to modern readers.

In our psychological interpretation, we will rely on the attachment-focused motherhood model presented above, which will serve as a theoretical framework for our interpretation. We will identify passages in all four Gospels that include key elements for the development of attachment in the relationship between Jesus and His mother, Mary. The characteristics of Mary's maternal attitude and her behavior in relation to Jesus will be evaluated in ongoing dialogue with scientific literature, particularly from the perspective of the development of secure or insecure attachment. We will assess her behavior for the presence or absence of attachment-centered parenting characteristics. We are aware that by doing so we purposely narrow the focus of our observation to a specific aspect of the relationship between Jesus and his mother. In addition, we are aware that psychological analysis as a method cannot be adequate for the theological evaluation of Mary's role in salvation history. We also recognize that with a narrow psychological interpretation of the text, we are exposed to the danger of overlooking some culturally conditioned features of Mary's experience of her maternal mission.

Nevertheless, we see at least two important reasons for using the psychological exegetical method in our research. The first reason can be seen in the potential of psychological methods to supplement other interpretive methods and contribute to their mutual enrichment. Different approaches to the text must be integrated to ensure that no single critical method becomes the only mode of interpretation. The application and integration of various forms of criticism leads to a more comprehensive understanding of the biblical text (Brown 2008, 64). Another reason for using the psychological method lies in its potential contribution to contemporary pastoral practice. It is an interpretive method that steps at the intersection of theology and psychology, so this approach allows us to compare the biblical tradition with the latest scientific findings in psychology. This connection between biblical texts and modern psychological findings in the field of parenting and interpersonal relationships can serve as a source of inspiration for modern Christian parents and also represent one of the foundations for the development of the theology of parenthood.

We selected relevant Gospel passages by first identifying all passages that mention Jesus' mother, Mary. For the psychological analysis of her maternal attitude and the development of attachment, we included in the final selection those Gospel passages that can be meaningfully interpreted through the lens of attachment theory. Where possible and appropriate, we considered the passages synoptically. For the

analysis of Mary's motherhood from the perspective of attachment theory, we selected six events from the lives of Mary and Jesus, as well as Jesus' genealogy, which is indirectly important for the development of attachment.

2.1. The Genealogy of Jesus and the Role of Knowing One's Roots (Matt 1:1–17; Luke 3:23–38)

We begin our analysis with the only passage that does not directly address Mary's maternal disposition but reflects a cultural characteristic of that time, which is also significant for understanding the concept of attachment. The Gospel of Matthew begins with the genealogy of Jesus Christ. While the genealogy is placed at the beginning for Christological reasons and to summarize the history of redemption (Tatum 1977, 523–27), it can also be evaluated through the lens of attachment theory. Understanding one's own roots, the characteristics of previous generations, including their various traumas, abuses, dependencies, and other trials, greatly assists an individual in breaking free from the grip of intergenerational transmissions and becoming more liberated from all the painful contents that, until they are acknowledged, are transmitted from generation to generation. It is known that the more we know about our families, the more we can know about ourselves, and the more freedom we have to determine how we want to live (McGoldrick 1995, 21).

For the development of secure attachment, it is not only important to understand the negative and traumatic experiences of past generations but also to comprehend the inner world of parents, which can be deeply influenced by their religious experience. The transmission of the kerygma, in its deepest sense, is precisely the communication of personal experience of how God entered into the lives of parents and transformed them (Stegu 2023, 1025).

2.2. The Annunciation and the Child's Unconditional Acceptance (Matt 1:18–25; Luke 1:26–38)

At the beginning of Mary's motherhood lies her consent, made possible only through unwavering faith and trust in God. Her entire existence is encapsulated in that brief "yes" (Speyr 1988, 5). From a human perspective, at the moment of the Annunciation, Mary finds herself in an extraordinarily challenging situation, thus the angel's words greatly unsettle her, even frighten her (Luke 1:29–30). In that instant, the weight of responsibility falls upon her to become the bearer of the fulfillment of generations of her people with her consent. Her life undergoes a radical transformation in an instant; all notions of the future, all plans she had made with her betrothed, are cast into doubt, everything becomes uncertain. It is highly likely that she was troubled by the question of how Joseph would receive the news of her conception, how he would act, and what it would mean for each of them. Not only was an uncertain

future looming, but also deep shame for her and her family. We can imagine that the news of her conception deeply wounded the delicate vulnerability of the emerging relationship between the betrothed. Joseph was evidently deeply affected at that moment, considering secretly divorcing her (Matt 1:19). In her emotional sensitivity, Mary surely felt with him; in this seemingly hopeless situation, she had only unwavering trust and faith in the Lord. Only from the deepest faith and trust could she wholeheartedly accept the child within her and sing her *Magnificat* (Luke 1:46–55).

Acceptance is one of the essential elements of securely attaching parenting. The foundation of every attachment is the decision of the parents to accept the child, to give him life. Sometimes parents feel unprepared for the child, that he is not coming at the right time. Pope Francis encourages parents to ask the Lord for healing and strength in such distress, so that they may fully accept and eagerly anticipate this child with all their hearts. It is important for the child to feel wanted (*AL* 170). Even Mary and Joseph needed this “healing,” so they accepted the angel’s words in faith, which helped them to de-center themselves, placing the transcendent—the child, the God—at the resonant center (Klun 2020, 290).

This ability to de-center oneself (cf. John 3:30) enables empathy toward the child; it is the foundation of openness for his experience to enter into the inner world of the parents (Simonič 2020, 315). In forming secure attachment, it is not just about accepting life; unconditional acceptance of the child, of his unique and irreplaceable personality, is also crucial for the child’s overall healthy development. In accepting the child, it is important for parents to distinguish between the person and the child’s behavior. If parents distinguish between the child as a person and his actions, they will be able to address, evaluate, and guide his behavior while continually expressing fundamental acceptance of the child as a person. The child must feel free to think what he thinks, feel what he feels, and experience what he experiences (Hughes 2009, 78–80). With this, parents reaffirm every day that initial and fundamental “yes” when they accepted the child’s arrival. Painful conditioning, abuse, interruptions in contact, abandonment, or neglect by parents undermine the child’s fundamental sense of acceptance and self-worth.

The child’s unconditional acceptance is thus the first fundamental maternal attitude of Mary, which we find in the Gospel. Although the announcement of Jesus’ coming represented an unimaginable change in Mary’s life, she responded to God’s call in faith immediately (cf. Luke 1:38). A psychological interpretation of the text, showing the dramatic experiences of Mary and Joseph at the moments of Jesus’ conception, can enrich the theological understanding of this first key moment in the history of salvation in which the Mother of God participated. It shows us that such an immediate, unconditional, and at the same time internally stable response from Mary is possible only from a firm grounding in her relationship with God and in complete devotion to Him. The connection between the relationship with God and the unconditional acceptance of the child, which is one of the fundamental principles

of attachment theory and an important factor in healthy child development, thus represents one of the important components of the developing theology of parenthood. When parents accept the child, they truly accept Jesus himself (cf. Matt 18:5), as Anna Maria Zanzucchi poignantly described in her vulnerable portrayal of the maternal experience (2008, 36). With this statement, Jesus not only placed the deepest dignity in every child but also elevated the dignity and value of parenthood.

2.3. The Presentation of Jesus in the Temple (Luke 2:22–38)

According to tradition, after the days of her purification, Mary and Joseph brought Jesus to the temple and presented him to God. They placed the child before the Lord and entrusted him to his care. For Mary, this act also represented a considerable challenge. During the pregnancy, the difference between her mission and the baby's mission was still unclear, but now the baby's mission emerged as something separate. The child sets out on his own path (Speyr 1988, 62). Mary stands as the guardian of Jesus' mission, but its full clarity eludes her, she struggles to understand it. Together with Joseph, she meditated on the profound words that were spoken about Jesus in the temple. Simeon's prophecies certainly evoked strong emotions in her when he predicted that Jesus would be "a sign that will be opposed," and that her own soul would be "pierced by a sword" (cf. Luke 2:33–35). On the one hand, it confirmed her faith in the fulfillment of God's promises of salvation, but on the other hand, he also revealed to her that she would have to live her obedience of faith in suffering, at the side of the suffering Savior, and that her motherhood would be mysterious and sad (*RM* 16).

From the point of view of attachment theory, the event of the presentation of Jesus in the temple has great significance, as it reveals Mary's fundamental recognition that Jesus' mission exceeds her own expectations, needs, and desires. Promoting the development of its members and the family as a whole is one of the main tasks of the family. By providing a safe base and a stimulating environment, parents facilitate the formation of a coherent autobiographical narrative in the child (Hughes 2007, 1–2). Under the guidance of caring parents, the child gradually explores his interests, takes initiative and develops qualities such as confidence, competence, and character (Kompan Erzar and Poljanec 2009, 13–15). This development process is made possible by offering to God, which must take place in the mother's heart as she prepares the space for what will be revealed according to the Son's autobiographical narrative. Therefore, in a psychological sense, we cannot properly understand the offering of Jesus in the temple without the context of two verses that strongly characterize this part of Luke's Gospel, namely that Mary "treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart" (cf. Luke 2:19 and 2:51). Among the fundamental elements of attachment-focused parenting, in addition to acceptance, there is also the curiosity and interest of parents in who their child really is and what his mission is, which the

child, and with him also his parents, have yet to discover (Hughes 2009, 85–87). In this regard, the phrase “she pondered them in her heart” suggests the important role of silence. Mary’s curiosity is fueled by silence, which allows her to ponder the truth about her son’s mission (Mizdrak 2024, 30).

The passage about Jesus’ offering in the temple represents an important contribution to the development of the theology of parenthood. Like Mary, every parent is also called to prepare a space within themselves for the discovery and acceptance of their child’s unique story, his unique mission, determined by God (cf. Jer 1:5). This requires a great deal of acceptance, openness, curiosity, empathy from the parents, as well as an internal distinction between their own ideas, plans and needs and the child’s experience. A child will be able to fulfill his mission only if he has enough inner freedom to listen to the inner call and gradually discover it. That is why parents are called to offer their children to God every day and recognize them in faith and help pave the way for their own vocation.

2.4. The Finding of Jesus in the Temple (Luke 2:41–52)

The passage about Jesus’ finding in the temple is, psychologically speaking, a logical continuation of Jesus’ presentation, as it reveals to us, to a certain extent, the course of his development under the guidance of this parental attitude of offering. Jesus was twelve years old at the time of this passage, an age that coincides with the onset of adolescence, a time of profound transformation in emotional, cognitive, and behavioral systems surrounding attachment relationships. Adolescents now evolve from being recipients of care to becoming self-sufficient adults and potential caregivers to other individuals in their lives (Allen 2008, 419). We can assume that upbringing thus far has been smooth and peaceful. A period passed when Mary nursed, watched Jesus’ first steps, listened to his first words, observed his exploration of play, surroundings, relationships, doing family chores, listening and perhaps reading scriptures. Aware of his divine origin, Mary likely observed him, pondering how his personality was maturing, how he was shaping himself, and preparing for the mission that awaited him. We might imagine she also questioned her role and responsibility in Jesus’ upbringing, entrusting him to the Father in her prayers. Nothing is revealed about whether she and Joseph discussed this, or whether they silently accepted their respective missions. Jesus observed them at work, observed how they engaged in interpersonal relationships, prayer, conversation, and rest. In their presence, he began to perceive and live a relationship with God, which must have increasingly stirred him and become more attractive, more central to him. Besides the obvious Christological purpose of the passage (Brown 2008, 250), Jesus’ stop in the temple can also be seen, on a psychological level, as the rebellion of an adolescent, expressing his inner essence for the first time, his true nature, differentiating himself from his parents, and thereby also foreshadowing his mission. For Mary and Joseph, as for other parents

of adolescents, this developmental step represented a shock and a great challenge, worthy of reconsideration in their hearts (cf. Luke 2:51).

Viewed from the perspective of attachment theory, the passage may initially surprise and even somewhat disturb us. Mary and Joseph, after celebrating Passover, return from the temple to Jerusalem, and only after a day's journey do they notice that Jesus is not among the traveling caravan. Some might see this as an expression of disinterest in the child or even neglect. The evangelist seems to excuse the parents, writing: "Thinking he was in the company, they traveled on for a day" (Luke 2:44). However, it seems much more justified to assume that this is a case of the parents' trust in Jesus, what Jesper Juul (2008) calls a competent child. Mary and Joseph evidently believed that Jesus, under such circumstances, was fully capable of caring for himself. Apparently, they also allowed him, as a teenager, space to develop within the relationships of the extended family, friends, and acquaintances. Expanding one's social network is an important step in the development of a securely attached adolescent (Erzar and Kompan Erzar 2011, 130). At the same time, the parents' assumption that Jesus was safe with the group reflects a healthy openness and social inclusiveness within the family, indicating that they were not closed off. This illustrates that it wasn't a matter of neglecting the child, but rather a display of healthy trust in him. This trust is firmly affirmed by Mary's poignant statement, expressing her and Joseph's anxious search for him (cf. Luke 2:48). From a relational, psychological perspective, the statement that he then "returned with them to Nazareth and was obedient to them" (Luke 2:51a) is also significant. The theological explanation of this sentence is that it probably means he no longer challenged revelatory events as he did in the temple (Brown 2008, 250). The psychological explanation for this reassurance can be found in the fact that conflicts between teenagers and parents arise mainly because parents are either unwilling or unable to recognize and address the unique and independent person their child is becoming (Juul 2008, 179). Apparently, Joseph and Mary were able to do this to a sufficient extent, as Jesus did not feel the need to challenge their acceptance with new events. The gospel confirmation of this internal process is unequivocally received in the same verse, emphasizing Mary's fundamental attitude of pondering what had happened (cf. Luke 2:51b).

2.5. Wedding at Cana in Galilee and Mother's Sensitive Encouragement (John 2:1-12)

The Wedding at Cana in Galilee is exclusively addressed in the Gospel of John. It marks a pivotal moment in Jesus' life, where, in accordance with the Father's will, he is said to have begun revealing the divine glory and his own divine nature through his first miracle. For thirty years, Mary awaited the fulfillment of what was announced to her at Jesus' birth (cf. Luke 2:19). Jesus, too, prepared for this moment; he was baptized (cf. Matt 3:13-17; Mark 1:9-11; Luke 3:21-22), underwent fasting

(cf. Matt 4:2; Luke 4:2), commenced his public ministry (cf. Matt 4:17; Mark 1:14–15; Luke 4:14–15), and gathered his first disciples (cf. John 1:35–51). Their anticipation of the revelation moment ran parallel; each had to anticipate his imminent arrival in their own way.

Yet, Jesus seems surprised and somewhat unsettled by Mary's words when she remarks at the critical moment of the wedding, "They have no more wine" (John 2:3). At first glance, these words might appear as a mere acknowledgment of the fact, but Mary's subsequent words reveal that this moment is far more significant; her words are a sign, an encouragement for him. Her "feminine genius" (Chmielewski 2020, 10; Makuchowska 2022, 128–29; *EV* 99; *MD* 30) evidently discerned that God's revelation would be connected with acts of alleviating human distress (the embarrassment and humiliation of the host) and celebrating love (the wedding). Hence, from a psychological standpoint, Jesus' sharp response might reflect tremor, agitation, even fear (his human nature!), as he realizes he is entering one of the key *kairos* moments in salvation history—the moment of revealing God's glory. One plausible explanation is that his own words surprise him in his agitation since they are in complete contradiction to what he does moments later. Mary remains calm, unfazed by her son's response, and does not withdraw but maintains an active stance, persisting with sensitivity. In terms of affect regulation, we could say she manages to maintain an open stance of love and trust and does not adopt a defensive posture (Hughes and Baylin 2012, 13). In this crucial moment, her demeanor reveals considerable determination and strength, as she gives a very direct instruction to the servants: "Do whatever he tells you" (John 2:5). This instruction can be understood as additional encouragement for Jesus. Through the mechanism of projective identification (Likierman 1988, 29–31), an important aspect of interpersonal relationships, Mary as a mother projects courage and confidence onto Jesus while simultaneously allowing him the space for personal choice.

From the perspective of attachment theory, such an interpretation of the text is highly significant, revealing numerous elements of secure attachment between the adult child and his mother. We receive a hint of this in the announcement of the wedding, where the evangelist states that Jesus' mother was *already* there, and Jesus and his disciples were *later* invited (cf. John 2:1). An intriguing theological explanation of this temporal sequence suggests that Mary, as Jesus' mother and the mother of the Church (Štrukelj 2014, 665–67), symbolically paved the way for Jesus and his disciples (Bartolomé 2011, 364). From the perspective of attachment theory, we can interpret that at the beginning of his public ministry, Mary's presence provided Jesus with a firm support and a sense of security. Additional confirmation of this interpretation can be found in the last sentence of the description of the wedding at Cana in Galilee, where the evangelist states that Jesus "went down to Capernaum with his mother, his brothers, and his disciples; and there they stayed for a few days" (John 2:12). Mentioning the mother's presence thus narratively frames the description of Jesus'

revelation of his divine nature. The emotional and physical presence of a parent in significant moments and during challenging life events significantly contributes to the formation of secure attachment.

Following our psychological interpretation of the dialogue between Mary and Jesus, this passage reveals an even more fundamental characteristic that establishes secure attachment between a child and his mother, namely, the mother's ability to regulate affect (Hughes and Baylin 2012, 43–48; Schore and Schore 2008, 11–12). As far as can be discerned from the passage, Mother Mary does not become frightened by Jesus' emotionally intense response. Instead, she gently persists with her instructions to the servants, paving the way for Jesus. In psychological terms, she maintains contact with herself and her inner certainty; therefore, she remains calm in the face of her son's response. From a perspective of faith, she is filled with the Holy Spirit at this moment and in communion with God, thus remaining steadfast in her trust in the Son.

Trusting in her son and recognizing his capabilities is the third important characteristic of Mary's motherly stance in this passage that fosters secure attachment. From a psychological perspective, alongside emotional regulation (fear, anger), Mother Mary projects courage and confidence onto her son, believing he will be able to take the next developmental step. She encourages him, yet does not pressure him, providing him with enough space and freedom for his decision to mature. In this conduct, we can recognize a significant characteristic of Mary's motherhood – sensitive guidance. This psychological interpretation of the passage can have profound theological implications that require further detailed analysis, as it surpasses the scope of our research. Namely, it is a fact that in one of the crucial moments in salvation history (the revelation of Jesus' divine nature), God leaves the initiative for this pivotal step to humans (the mother, a woman), and reacts to it with agitation. Given the weight of the event, it is one of the greatest acknowledgments to mothers, women, and humanity in general, as God assumes human vulnerability (Globokar 2022, 11–12) and allows humans to embolden him (according to theological interpretation: to beseech him) for the key salvific step.

2.6. Jesus' Mother and Brothers (Mark 3:20–35)

This is an event described by three evangelists that, at first glance, only tangentially touches upon the relationship between Mary and Jesus. The passage primarily carries a theological and christological message, which is particularly evident in Mark's Gospel, where the most significant antagonism between Jesus' family and his disciples is apparent (Brown 2008, 157). For our psychological analysis of the mother-son relationship through the prism of attachment theory, some other emphasises are crucial. First, the mother's response is essential when rumors begin to spread that Jesus is not acting sensibly in his public appearances and that his life has changed to the extent that, amid the crowd of disciples and other listeners, he does not even have time

to eat (cf. Mark 3:20–21). However, Mary envisioned his path differently, expecting him to increasingly reveal his kingdom, his divinity, and his glory. As she followed his journey from afar, fear arose within her that something might happen to hinder or obscure his mission. She no longer understood; at least, she wanted to speak with him to be reassured and find light in her soul once again (Speyr 1988, 89). A mother remains a mother forever; her mission never ends, so she cannot calmly witness her son's suffering. She wants to remain active in the relationship, making her body and her ability to regulate emotional distress available to serve her son. Only if she felt peace in his soul again would she be reassured.

Jesus' rejection indeed expresses deep secure attachment, which may seem somewhat paradoxical at first glance. For a child to prioritize his deepest mission over comforting his mother is, in fact, an expression of great trust in her. Only a child who deeply trusts that his mother will be able to accept the child's path can, in such a moment, maintain himself, the connection with his true mission, and instead of partaking of prepared food (cf. Mark 3:20), nourish himself by doing the will of the One who sent him (cf. John 4:34). The mission had to take precedence; only through rejection could the Church become the mother of Jesus and all his disciples, with Mary as its living image, enabling Jesus, in the end, from the cross, to say, "Woman, behold your son!" (John 19:27). Mary's offering of Jesus to God thus began to receive final confirmation from a symbolic act in the temple; only through her son's abandonment could she fully experience Jesus' cry to the end: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matt 27:46; Mark 15:34), and their shared suffering could reveal its ultimate fruitfulness (Speyr 1988, 93).

For the emerging theology of parenthood, based on our psychological analysis of the passage, two emphases are crucial. The first stems from Mary's natural maternal stance, as a mother is never indifferent to what is happening to her child; therefore, she will always be ready to listen to her child's experience and support him in his efforts, his mission. In this passage, Mary did nothing wrong; on the contrary, even adult children occasionally need to feel accepted by their parents, to be able to be themselves with someone, regardless of what they are experiencing and dealing with (McGoldrick 1995, 276–78). It is right that parents create space for their child's feeling of acceptance throughout their lives. However, it is important that boundaries are appropriately set and respected, and that adult children take full responsibility for their lives (Coleman 2012, 293–308). Therefore, in a supportive stance, parents are called to "offer" their expectations, beliefs, and desires and allow the child to listen to their deepest calling and live their mission. The second important emphasis relates to the rejection experienced by Mary. With this rejection, she began to anticipate the pain of the cross; her son made her share in the cross (Balthasar 1997, 116). This trial of Mary's serves as a guide and anchor point for all suffering parents who feel that, at a certain stage in life, they do not have access to their child or cannot help them in their suffering, distress, or quest for a path (Gregor 2013, 116).

2.7. Mother Beneath Cross (John 19:25–27)

Mary, stunned and broken, accompanies her son's suffering, unable to comprehend what is happening. Her good, beloved Son, given to her by the Father, is nailed to the rough and harsh wood of the cross. The end of his life, his plans, hopes, and actions draw near. She experiences the depths of shame and pain He endures (Speyr 1988, 94). The sword of Simeon's prophecy has definitively pierced her soul (cf. Luke 2:35). Despite the unspeakable pain that pierces her heart, she compassionately stands by Him in his most bitter trial, feeling with Him as He feels abandoned by the Father (cf. Matt 27:46; Mark 15:34). Standing alongside the Apostle John beneath the cross, she does not observe the events from a distance like some other disciples. Psychologically, another crucial dimension of a securely attaching parenting style dramatically unfolds here: passionate accompaniment. At first glance, this task of parents may seem somewhat more passive, but therefore perhaps all the more demanding and important. Given contemporary understanding of how the mechanism of bodily empathy operates (Rotschild 2006, 45–59), we can understand that Mary, in strong identification with Jesus, could not distinguish between her son's and her own crucifixion—it was as if she herself were hanging on the cross. Thus, after the incarnation and the revelation of Jesus' divine nature, Mary actively participates in the third key event of salvation history—his sacrifice on the cross. Despite the unspeakable pain, she is able to maintain a lively faith and love that turns out to be stronger than fear and opens her to the divine and human “you” (Chmielewski 2023, 143–44; *MD* 15). This is possible only as Mary continually forgives the perpetrators, thereby opening her heart to compassion and trust in God's incomparable providence (Erzar 2019, 15).

Just before his death, Jesus addresses his mother and the beloved disciple standing beneath the cross, saying, “Woman, behold, your son!” and “Behold, your mother!” (John 19:26), establishing a new relationship, a new community between them. Jesus did not wait for their consent; He simply commanded them (Bartolomé 2011, 367). Therefore, these words primarily have deep theological and ecclesiological significance, which must also be considered in our psychological interpretation of the text. With these words, Jesus appoints Mary as the mother of the Church and its embodied image. Adrienne von Speyr also sees in these words the establishment of a special form of following Christ, namely the consecrated life (1988, 101). In this way, Mary is placed at the center of the community to enable its mission to bear fruit. By appointing her as the spiritual mother of his mystical body (Štrukelj 2014, 666), Jesus definitively affirms Mary's motherhood, placing her, in the language of attachment theory, as a secure base and a safe haven for all his disciples.

3. Mary's Sensitive Motherhood as a Model for Contemporary Christian Parents

Our psychological exploration of the biblical passages depicting Mary's maternal role, evaluated through the lens of scientifically established attachment theory, reveals her profound "maternal genius." Taking into account the temporal and cultural distance, it is fascinating how consistent Mary's maternal attitude is with the findings of modern psychological science. While reading the six Gospel passages, we discovered a number of characteristics of secure attachment motherhood. The passages that describe Mary's motherly attitude can serve as a source of inspiration for modern Christian parents, encouraging them to become a secure base and safe haven for their children. As we have shown, the three fundamental principles of safe attachment motherhood – unconditional acceptance, sensitive guidance and compassionate accompaniment – are closely related to three key events in the history of salvation: the incarnation of the Son of God, the revelation of Jesus' divine nature and his sacrifice on the cross. The obvious connection between the key elements of secure attachment parenting and key events in the history of salvation opens up a reflection on the role of secure attachment parenting in mediating and deepening the kerygma, which is the ultimate meaning of Christian formation in families (*AL* 58–59).

Although the above mentioned three key characteristics of secure attachment parenting remain important throughout the parent-child relationship, each takes on special significance during different life stages. Unconditional acceptance sets the foundation for a child's existence, sensitive guidance assumes a critical role in the child's journey from infancy to emerging adulthood, and compassionate accompaniment is emphasized in the parent's interaction with the adult child. All these accounts of Mary's motherhood are connected by a common thread: the fourth element of safe and sensitive parenting, the skillful regulation of emotions, deeply rooted in Mary's intimate and profound relationship with God.

As shown in our analysis, at the beginning of her motherhood stands unconditional acceptance, the key "yes" with which Mary responded to God's call (cf. Luke 1:38; von Speyr 1988, 5). Reflecting on her consent at the moment when her vocation surprised her can encourage Christian parents to decide to accept the conceived life even when their life circumstances are uncertain and full of challenges. Acceptance, a key element of attachment-centered parenting (Hughes 2009, 78–85), is not a one-time event at conception, but is affirmed throughout life, as emphasized in the Gospel account of Mary's motherhood. Accepting a child means being open to accepting the child's personality, his personal vocation and unique life path, it means entrusting the child to God, as Mary and Joseph did in the temple, and as Mary affirmed until Jesus' death on the cross. From Simeon's prophecy onward, it became clear that Mary's acceptance of Jesus' way of life would not always be joyful. In this, Mary's example can offer support and inspiration to Christian parents, encouraging

them to seek comfort and strength in spirituality and in their relationship with God, so that they can more easily overcome the trials that parenthood brings (Jerebic, Bošnjaković, and Jerebic 2023, 362).

Particularly crucial for understanding Mary's maternal character and her "maternal genius" are two verses from Luke's Gospel that show Mary treasuring and pondering these words in her heart (cf. Luke 2:19 and 2:51). Mary accepts the mission of Jesus without her own expectations, but rather opens up to it, gradually discovers and accepts it. Although a comprehensive and in-depth analysis of these verses is necessary for a reliable interpretation, we can conclude that "pondering in her heart" includes thinking, praying, contemplating, as well as regulating and processing emotions. In essence, this means that she opened a space for nurturing the development of Jesus and encouraging the maturation of his mission. The path taken by Mary in her role as a mother is also the path of her personal maturation, maturation of her faith and trust in God. This perspective is something that can become an important contribution of Mariology in dialogue with modern social science: in Mary's case, parenthood is largely openness to the unknown, acceptance of the unexpected, and giving up one's own expectations (cf. John 12:24). As such, it brings opportunities for personal maturation and deepening of faith and trust in God.

Finally, as shown in our analysis, the fundamental characteristics of Mary's motherhood are closely related to the modern concept of attachment-focused parenting. The evaluation of Mary's motherhood in the light of modern scientific findings can serve as one of the fundamental starting points for the developing theology of parenthood. One of the greatest challenges in the theology of parenthood is how to help parents connect Christian doctrine, Christian anthropology, and personal faith with modern advances in knowledge about interpersonal relationships and child rearing.

As was the case with Mary, Christian parents can find inspiration to develop the essential qualities of safe parenting in an intimate and trusting relationship with God. The key starting point of her maternal attitude was her faith in God, from which she drew everything that Jesus needed for the development of his mission: her unconditional acceptance, sensitive guidance, compassionate accompaniment and constant regulation of emotions. Our analysis suggests that the "maternal genius" of Mary, her example of maternal life based on trust and an intimate relationship with God, can serve as a source of inspiration for contemporary Christian parents when approached with pastoral sensitivity.

Conclusions

An important conclusion of our research is that Mariology can establish a very fruitful dialogue with modern science in the field of parenting and interpersonal relationships. The more we understand with the help of science the characteristics of quality interpersonal relationships in the family, the more we can be impressed by the sensitivity and relational security of Mary's maternal attitude. It seems that science today, through concepts such as attachment theory, is giving words to what has intuitively fascinated and inspired Christians for two millennia. Recognizing Mary's sensitive and secure motherhood in the light of the most modern scientific knowledge therefore represents a great opportunity for pastoral practice, as it is a topic that appeals to modern people. As we have shown in our analysis, it is important that Mariology, similarly to pastoral practice (Ganc 2024, 50–51), opens up to interdisciplinary dialogue, which empowers it and opens up new perspectives.

Mary's journey of motherhood, as revealed to us through the analyzed biblical passages, not only represents an example to Christian parents for sensitive and secure motherhood, but also gives meaning to the suffering of parents and inspires hope that this suffering is meaningful and leads to salvation. The willingness to experience and regulate emotions is a strong common thread of all the passages that depict Mary in her maternal role and is a key element of attachment-focused parenting and the foundation of healthy child development.

The aggiornamento of Mariology with the introduction of new perspectives, which we propose in our research through the dialogue at the intersection of theology and psychology, can therefore greatly contribute to the renewal of the Church, since the "feminine" and "maternal genius" of the Mother of God is again and again a relevant factor influencing the authenticity of faith and church life (Królikowski 2022, 86). Mary's sensitive and secure motherhood is not only an example for many Christian parents, but must also appeal to the modern Church to wrap its pastoral activity in tenderness (Simonič 2018, 216). One of the important ways in which the Church should lead believers to holiness is to help them live holiness, based on love, which is evidenced through sensitive and secure marriages and families (Przygoda 2022, 455–56). The life of Mother Mary on this path remains a point of reference both for Christian parents and for the reforming Church, which responds to the challenges of modern secularization.

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