

Hanna Strack

## A Ritual/Liturgy of Blessing for Pregnant Women and Unborn Children

A challenge for churches as institutions of the society

The theme of the conference asks whether the society supports prenatal children and their mothers. Christian Churches as part of our society confine only to demands on ethics when dealing with the prenatal child.

In the first part of my lecture I want to show, why churches could not give any emotional and spiritual supports by rituals or liturgies until now.

In the second part I will present my own outline of a liturgy of blessing, first giving reasons for the single parts of it and then presenting a proposal of an agenda. I do this in order to give a stimulation for a new creativity in the life of parishes.

### 1. Christian theology and church practice

During the period of the churchfathers Christian theology was influenced by Greek philosophy, adopting these two principals: 1. In hierarchical order women have to stand under men. 2. The negative valuation of the womb as, according to Plato, “is roaming about everywhere in the body and causes all kinds of diseases.” (Timaios 91 c-d). Mary, mother of Jesus, and Sophia, in orthodox churches highly considered as of divine wisdom, are both women of equal worth to men before God, as they are seen without real body. Lutheran churches have removed even these female images out of the “upper parliament” (C. G. Jung) and they condemned or reduced rituals and liturgies as much as possible being too sensuous, as they thought.

The woman who had been pregnant, who had given birth and is now breastfeeding had according to roman-catholic rite to be purified on her the churchgoing. The English high-church knows the ceremony of “Thanksgiving of Women after childbirth”. The priest welcomes the mother on a side-entrance, sprinkles her with consecrated water and by praying for her purification leads her into the church. Midwives were considered as impure as well and could not receive the Holy Communion until a certain number of days were gone by – needing a longer period at the birth of a daughter than of a son. In this way corporeal experiences of women were disqualified!

Baptism of newborn children was considered not only as necessary for salvation, it also took on the role of welcoming the child and therefore puts childbirth as a creative process into the background. These traditions are remaining until now.

There was all the time another tradition, too, beginning in the Old Testament, which knows apart from the rules for purification in Leviticus other stories of childbirth very concrete, so the birth of Tamars twins, Perez and Serach (Gen 38) or the prenatal quarrel of Rebeccas twins, Esau and Jacob (Gen 25). Even a “blessing of breasts and womb” (Gen 49,25) there is promised. Prophets understand themselves as chosen by God already in the womb of their mothers (Jes 49,1; Jer 1,4f). Jesus himself considered and blessed women, even the menstruating woman (Mark. 5, 25-34), as equal in the face of God. In the letters of the apostles there is already introduced the hierarchy, which claims women standing under men.

Hildegard von Bingen (1098-1179), a Benedictine nun, is another of this example in the Middle Ages. In one of her visions she sees a child being influenced by the Holy Spirit in the womb of its mother.

There is another tradition, too, in the Celtic Christian spirituality, where midwife and mother together bless the newborn child. This is a sign that the body of women and childbirth are seen as not being impure, but positive. This shows an autonomous spirituality of women.

Now it is time to continue and strengthen this positive tradition towards women coming out of a lively faith. This is the background of the following blessing-liturgy by my self.

### 2. Outline of blessing-liturgy for pregnant women and there family

#### 2.1. Theoretical arguments

Thanks to the pre- and perinatal research we are having now a new look on birth and life in the womb. We are recognizing it to be a creative process women are sharing in. The female body is not impure, it is the place for the Divine to appear as an encounter with the Holy.

Pregnancy is a time of borderline experience, of changing the identity and of devotion. The ongoing interaction between mother and child coins the self of the child for its life. That’s why pregnancy is a sensitive

phase for spirituality of all who are concerned. “In the womb the foundations for trust, joy, creativity, power of life and self responsible, active handling of problems are given.” (Werner Gross, Was erlebt ein Kind im Mutterleib? – what is a child experiencing in the womb?).

Free midwives (in Germany) have already chosen a practice in their preparation groups where in a circle the strengthening and healing takes place, being the initial “holy circles”. Yet it should be the whole society which supports mother and child during pregnancy.

The goal of the blessing-liturgy I am going to present here is to strengthen the pregnant women and her trust into the divine presence. So the child can feel the atmosphere of the spirit and the power of Gods love. The bodily activities during the blessing-liturgy are helpful.

When I am using the word “GOD” I just mean the ground of being, the creative power of life, which Jesus Christ was preaching as strength of love. There are numerous images of this deity from which we can use only those who are compatible with pure love, therefore the images of God as a ruler or a judge are not possible.

F. e. in psalm 22, 10 God acts comparable to a midwife: “Yet it was you who took me from the womb; you kept me safe on my mother’s breast. On you I was cast from my birth, and since my mother bore me, you have been my God.”

Now I give you the meaning of each element in the blessing-liturgy:

*Music*, (children love f. e. that of Vivaldi and Mozart) and/or the sound of the gong is reaching the prenatal child, it is able to hear it and remember it later.

*Singing* together supports the community together with the child, which hears especially the voice of her or his mother and is recognising it after birth. The hymns of the German songbook are not known in other countries, therefore people should look for their own ones.

*Rocking to sleep* is a rhythmic stimulus, in which the child is reminded of the motherly heart and feels the intimacy with the mother. It gives her or him good roots.

The *slight touching* of the womb enables the child later to make contacts to other people in their environment. To caress it is a comforting gesture for both mother and child. According to the young science of haptonomie this touching stimulates the blood and makes warm hands, feet and the head. A quiet inner dialog with the unborn child is going to take place. This leads for the child to a fundamental feeling of being affirmed and encouraged. The love of the parents to their child can so be absorbed and reinforced.

*Outside and inside images* encourage the creativity of life. Stories of the Bible affirm inside images. As an outside image we can see pictures by Hildegard von Bingen and by students of midwifery in the German town Tübingen, which we will look at during the blessing-liturgy.

*Words of blessing* are affirmative expressions. What is said becomes reality. They are just like a soundingboard for the presence of the divine wisdom and power. This event of speech has to be done with inner authority.

In this way the child’s trust and confidence is affirmed and the self-confidence of the mother is positively supported during this time of ambivalent emotions.

The gift of an *angel* has the same meaning as transitional object (D.W. Winnicott) as the placenta is the first ally for the child.

This blessing-liturgy means for each *person*:

The attention and care during the blessing-liturgy is able to build a bridge for mothers to their new emotions of hope and fear, negative emotions are going to be dismissed. The child feels itself to be held, carried, understood and protected. It is able to notice that it is perceived and welcomed.

Fathers are addressed in their quite new social and emotional role and brothers and sisters, too.

The trustful relationship to the midwife is going to be reinforced by including her.

This blessing-liturgy is able to give a new home and reach spirituality for all concerned in this sensitive times.

All together it supports the creativity of life, is a gift of quality of life and promotes the child’s development of existence.

Therefore the blessing-liturgy contents the following parts:

- touching of hands, feet, womb
- singing altogether
- speaking about hope and joy, fear and worries
- evoking inner pictures
- reading supporting stories
- preaching the Love of God for everybody
- including the midwife and speaking about spiritual midwifery

- giving an angel figure in order to show that participants

God's presence is accompanying all

The following outline for blessing is meant as collection of ideas. Single parts could be chosen or new ones could be added.

## 2.2 Blessing-liturgy for pregnant women and their children

### Music – gong

#### Welcome by the reverend:

Dear becoming mothers, dear families and friends, midwives and all who are going to accompany and help when a new human being arrives.

We welcome you very hearty in this blessing-ritual, on which we want to pray for God's blessing of the child, the mother and the childbirth.

We are glad to experience this healing event together with you. You may be accompanied by all of us.

Therefore you got a paper with pictures and hymns.

#### We are celebrating this blessing

in the name of God, who is the supporting power of life

in the name of Jesus Christ, who was blessing children

in the name of the Holy Spirit, who gives us courage to live.

Elisabeth welcomed Mary, mother of Jesus Christ, with these words: "You are blessed among the women and blessed is the child you will bear." Luk 1,42

**Hymn** of your choice.

#### Reverend:

Dear families, in your centre a new life is growing up, a new creation of God, in the midst of the womb. The parents procreated with joy and now the miracle happens: it is growing from millimetre size to a viable child, its brain and heart are active even being very small, it is soon able to listen to music.

For many of you the picture of the ultrasound is the first encounter with your child. But even before this you mothers experience how your body is changing.

In the earlier times it was the movement of the child which announced the mother, that in her womb a child is growing up.

Let me tell you a story from the bible, from the encounter of two unborn ones, John the Baptist and Jesus:

Mary had listened to the gospel of the angel: "Peace be with you! Don't be afraid, God has been gracious to you. You will become pregnant and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus." Mary did not want to be alone so she was visiting her Cousin Elizabeth, who was pregnant, too.

Let me now read the New Testament in Luk 1, 39-45: "A short time later Mary hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea. She went into Zechariah's home, where she greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, her baby moved within her.

The Holy Spirit came upon Elizabeth. Then in a loud voice she said to Mary: God has blessed you more than any other woman! He has also blessed the child you will have. Why should the mother of my Lord come to me? As soon as I heard your greeting, my baby became happy and moved within me. The Lord has blessed you because you believed that he will keep his promise." And of course we all know the story of the birth of Jesus, our gospel at Christmas, which happened in a stable in Bethlehem!

Today we are discovering quite new how the child is experiencing everything also this ceremony, the music, all atmosphere.



In the Middle Ages a picture was painted – a vision from Hildegard von Bingen – you have it on your paper. There we see a child within the womb of its mother just before being born. The mother holds her hands over it, blessing it. The people right and left are carrying dishes with the child's heritage. From above a beam comes to the child. This is the Holy Spirit coming from the deity – here painted as a quadrangle with many eyes. And it really means, that God's Spirit is already flowing to the unborn child, which is now one of the children of God.

Now I invite you who sit on the right and left of the pregnant mothers to put your hands on their belly while I am speaking words of blessing to the child. It will listen to my voice lying in a purple light in the womb:

Child, blessed be your heart, so you may be kind and lively!

Child, blessed be your feet, which support you all time!

Child, blessed be your shoulders, arms and hands, so you are able to do good things!

Child, blessed be your head, so good thoughts may rise from it!

Child, blessed be your senses, so you will care for the earth and all human beings with attention and love!

### **Silence and rocking**

**Hymn** of your choice:

### **Reverend:**

Dear mothers, this is a special time for you! Time of good hope, time of carrying a child under your heart! You are experiencing many changes. Your body is a two-in-one-body during these months. For some of you it is not easy to accept this. Others are feeling themselves worthy twice. And others are feeling lonely because they are the only one in their environment who is experiencing this at the moment. It may be that in your place at work people are not happy about your pregnancy, even some families have reservations about it.

You now have got the book for medicine for maternity promising security. But you feel yourself that you are living in these nine months with hope, with good hope – that means this old expression, hope for health of yourself and of the child, hope for a happy birth, just having a feeling of anticipated joy and hope for this new being! But you live with fear and worry, too. Sometimes you just can not be happy.

That's while we say: you have a blessed womb, your womb needs blessings!

I had the great experience to accompany the birth of the third child of a mother, who wrote to me: I ask you to encourage women to follow her inner voice so that they are confident for their bodies and of divine guidance. So they are able to dare giving birth, an experience which should not be expected with fear as a moment of fright but an intentional experience of solemn event. Later this can be a great source of strength. Now I would like to invite all pregnant mothers to come and all others please to form a circle around the women!

### **Act of blessing**

The Reverend speaks to each mother: "God bless you!" spreading a bit of oil on their forehead then putting the hand on the belly, she can speak some very individual words, too.

Then she or he speaks to all:

Dear pregnant mothers,

I bless your mind,

I bless your heart,

I bless your body,

I bless the child in you!

The angel of God may accompany you!

Feelings of fear or debt  
 give up into the womb of Gods Love.  
 Light may cover you!  
 Be full of strength and courage!  
 Have great trust!  
 God is with you and your child.  
 Don't be afraid!  
 Be of good hope!  
 Amen

### **Silence and rocking**

**Hymn** of your choice:

#### **Reverend:**

Dear midwives! All who are accompanying the unborn child, mothers and fathers have trust in you. That is why you have a most important part in our society. Specially for you I now read a story from the bible which shows your responsibility very plastically. Here two midwives reject the order to kill and make an effort not against but for human life. This story tell about Egypt during slavery of the people of Israel:

Let me now read the Old Testament in Ex 1,15-21: "Finally, the king of Egypt called in Shiphrah and Puah, the two women who helped the Hebrew mothers when they gave birth. He told them, 'If a Hebrew woman gives birth to a girl, let the child live. If the baby is a boy, kill him!' But the two women were faithful to God and did not kill the boys, even though the king had told them to. The king called them in again and asked, 'Why are you letting those baby boys live?' They answered, 'Hebrew women have their babies much quicker than Egyptian women. By the time we arrive, their babies are already born.' God was good to the two women because they truly respected him, and he blessed them with children of their own."



On your paper you have another picture painted by students of midwifery. Lets look on it now! There is painted the great miracle in the womb showed by the light of the sun, the red of the heart, the rainbow and hope in the color of green. But there is sorrow there as well, too, showed by the cross on the left. The tree is an image for the strength mothers and midwives invest during the process of giving birth. Like the roots of the tree both should be connected with the earth. As seasons are changing there are good and bad days and nights.

**Hymn** of your choice:

#### **Reverend:**

Let me now talk to the fathers! You realize now that you emotionally join in these events. A new identity and a new importance is overgrowing you. You are now living full of expectation for the birth. Not in every case it is good for a father to stay with his wife during the process of birth. There should not be a social pressure on him. A father who doesn't stay there is going to be a good father as well!

You elder children are looking forward to the new child in the family. And you will be surprised how tiny the baby is, yet very lively!

We believe that God is the supporting power of life, the power of love. We say also God is the light all over us. By blessing we open ourselves for this power and we are now connected with him.

Just as the placenta is companion and supporter of the unborn child so we wish that the angels of God may be your supporter and protector in these months and weeks before and after the birth:

The angel of love and grace  
 The angel of confidence and trust

The angel of power and protection!

The reverend gives a little angel or a picture of an angel to everybody.

**Music – gong**

**Invitation to juice and cakes**