

Seeing the crucified Christ in my wife's C-section

I see love incarnate in suffering flesh, a body bearing a body in pain for love.

by [Brad East](#) in the [August 28, 2019](#) issue



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She lies on a cross. My wife is preparing to give birth to our daughter. It's our fourth child, her fourth time on the instrument. She does not hang on it. She is lying down, strapped to it, her arms outstretched. Her body is pierced; from her side, intermingled fluids drip and flow, the wounds and substance of a mother's love. Her body, unable to progress in natural childbirth, is subjected to—she willingly subjects it to—a scalpel. Her hand and back and abdomen are stuck, cut, torn, and sewn back together. She will bear these scars for the rest of her life, scars both visible and invisible, within the body and without.

For my wife, each conception means not only 40 weeks of bodily change, sustained episodes of nausea, increasing discomfort, and endless exhaustion. It means the knowledge that the scalpel is coming: the operating room awaits. She knows this.

She foresees it, and nonetheless she welcomes the creation of new life inside her womb. She praises God when it comes. With thanksgiving she sets out on the way of pain, her own personal path of suffering. For the joy set before her, she begins the journey whose only end is a cross.

What can a husband do during those weeks and months? What can he do in the crowd of witnesses gathered around that cruciform body?

The doctors, midwives, and nurses act in perfect concert toward a single goal: bring this child into the world, and keep her mother in it. They don't ask whether the procedure is elective or necessary, whether the parents have made a responsible decision, whether Mom spansks or Dad's got a job, whether this is One Too Many in a world of finite resources, whether we'd considered all our options some months before. Their goal is: *Get this baby out and present her to her mother.*

My role is simply to witness these things. And all I see is Christ. Christ is visible in this room. Servants of life serve my wife and daughter. They image Christ's undying aid to the least of these. In attending to the one on the cross and the one she bears, they attend to Christ himself. The life they midwife into this world is somehow his life too, has life because of his life, shares in life because he is life itself. In the truest cliché we have, they are doing the Lord's work.

I see Christ here, and I see his mother. Christ is himself our mother, and so is Mary. For the church is Christ's body, birthed into being at the cross; yet the church is also our mother, figured by Mary, standing beneath her exalted, suffering Son, who gives to her his beloved disciple, and in him all others, to be her children. Mary, all-holy virgin, is therefore both (as Dante put it) the daughter of her son and the mother of all his children.

From the beginning, Mary knew the painful road that stretched out before her. Counting the cost, she said yes. In her we recognize our own yes, the yes and amen of Christ in whom all the promises of God come true. For the saints in glory, Dante said, Mary is "the noon-time torch of love." For mortals here below, she is "the clearest fountain of their living hopes."

At the Church of the Annunciation in Nazareth, in the cave where it is said that Gabriel first spoke to the mother of God, on the altar it reads: *verbum caro hic factum est*. There is a time and a place of the Word's tabernacling among us, and it isn't in Bethlehem in a manger. Incarnation begins in the temple of Mary's womb.

Fiat mihi, "be it done to me," is the start of Christ's work of salvation, and in her reply all the replies of Mary's children have their source and strength. Her faith is the faith of all God's children, the hinge of Israel's history and the turn of the ages; through Mary's consent, Abraham's trust in God finds its consummation in Gethsemane, where Abraham's son submits to God's will with the bloody anguish of labor's final hours.

No wonder, then, that when I look at my wife's outstretched arms, I see Christ, and Mary, and Christ again. I see them, I see him, because I see love incarnate, unconquerable love in suffering flesh. This body bears a body in pain for love. Christ bore our sins in his body on the tree; by his wounds we have been healed (1 Peter). The archetype of maternal love is nothing less than the passion of the God-man: a human being willingly giving himself over to suffering for the beloved; the author of life becoming the author of salvation, creating anew what death had sought to snuff out. As the cross is a curse that saves, so childbirth's pains are a curse that nevertheless gives life.

For in the economy of grace, neither curse is the final word. Another Eve has come, and in her Son both curses are exhausted, undone from within. Love still hurts here below, and love's pain will last so long as this world endures. Love outbids such suffering even now, though, as Christ's countless daughters, sisters, and mothers bear witness. He makes himself known through them, as he did to me, through my wife and our daughter. It is a mystery altogether humbling, certainly to those of us reduced to being onlookers. The only fitting response is dumbstruck awe, followed by the sacrifice of praise.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "Birth on a cross."