

Leonardo's *Virgin, Child and St. Anne*: a Meditation on Motherhood

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Leonardo da Vinci's *The Virgin and Child with St. Anne* (1503) shows Jesus with Mary and his maternal grandmother, who is not mentioned in the Bible. Anne's story comes entirely from apocryphal texts, such as those incorporated into Jacobus de Voragine's thirteenth-century *Golden Legend*, which had more printed copies than the Bible before 1501 in nearly every major European language. Even as fiction, the popularity of these legends is crucial to understanding Christian art.

The *Golden Legend* describes Mary's parents, Joachim and Anne, as a generous older couple who vowed to dedicate their child to the Lord's service if granted one. During an annual visit to the Temple, a priest chided Joachim and turned him away from the altar because he was cursed with infertility. Ashamed, he went to his shepherds and with Joachim's whereabouts unknown, Anne wept in the city. An angel appeared to each of them and announced that they will have a daughter called Mary who will be full of the Holy Ghost and who would marvelously bare a son named Jesus who will be given to all people. Fulfilling their vow, Mary serves at the Temple from age three to fourteen when the priests arrange her marriage to Joseph. Then she moves to her parents' house for the year of betrothal where the Annunciation occurred.

Imagine the situation! Mary is in a home she barely remembered to await marriage to a man she didn't know who suspected her of unfaithfulness (until an angel set things right in a dream). Though willing to fulfill God's will, Mary could not have fully known that this meant enduring rumors of promiscuity, birthing and raising a precocious child, becoming a refugee, and watching her sweet son fulfill his mission to his torturous death. Leonardo depicts



Leonardo da Vinci, *The Virgin and Child with St. Anne*, 1503. Oil on wood (66 x 44 inches). Louvre Museum,

Anne as Mary's unconditional support by placing the figures in solid triangular composition with Anne's head at the apex and feet firmly on the ground. Mary sits childlike upon her mother's lap reaching for Jesus. Jesus is positioned between his mother and the lamb—the incarnate stage between his divine birth and his sacrificial death. Both the head of the lamb and of Jesus turn toward Mary with a connection that anticipates the emotional contradiction of the Pietà. As a mother, she struggles with the pain of the ultimate loss of her child, but as saint she accepts God's will.

The rhythm of Mary's arms reaching for Jesus while he reaches for the lamb captures their participation in God's will. Mary actively holds her playful human child while Jesus is passively held. But Jesus actively holds the lamb foreshadowing his participation in God's will in the garden of Gethsemane when he prayed "not as I will, but as you will" (Matthew 26:39).

The arms of Mary and Anne also show a mother's struggle of holding on and letting go of our children. With each stage of a child's independence, mothers let go a little at a time until, like Anne, we hold on no more and provide a stable, loving foundation for our children to return as needed. Anne lovingly watches the intimate interaction between her daughter and grandchild as Mary takes the active role of mothering. Through this painting, Leonardo gives us the divine story of mothers in different stages of motherhood. Happy Mother's Day to mothers to-be, new, and old

Art & Belief adult education classes return on Sundays, June 8, 15, and 21. We will look at images of the Pentecost, the development of Joseph as patron saint of fathers, and architecture of the Temple that Jesus knew. If you have questions, email. Gayle Goudy at gaylegoudy@gmail.com.