

pains of those marked for liquidation or subordination.

We do not ordinarily think that people lose their standing as human beings, and as bearers of rights, when they suddenly become weak and vulnerable and dependent on the care of others. But for many who have absorbed the idea of a right to abortion, the dependence of the fetus in the mother's womb has been taken as a sign quite sufficient that the child has no standing as a separate being, with a claim to the protection of the law. The laws on abortion mark the child now as a living thing under the unchecked power of the pregnant woman. Whether it lives or dies must depend entirely on her will, not to be reviewed or judged by any other standard.

It is this hopeless subordination of the child in the womb that works, in this inverted outlook, to extinguish its rights. When we strip away the fuzzy language of empathy, what stands revealed is a prettified version of the Rule of the Strong: The strong will rule the weak, and their power to rule confirms the rightness of that rule.

What President Obama offers in the search for empathy is not a wider sensibility, alert to the sufferings of humans wherever they can be found. Nor is it the maudlin sentiment of the soft-hearted. It is merely the will to power, hiding behind banter as facile as it is false.

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## Sisters & Daughters

*Robert Miola*

**I**t started back in May 2001, at a graduation party in my daughter's tiny New York apartment, just off Broadway, five flights up. Christine has won prizes in classics and Italian, a set of other honors, and she has no use for any of them. She has dropped two decades of aspiration and academic achievement, two decades of building a self in society, two decades of dreams about the future, without so much as a whistle.

"I'm not interested in that any more," she says. I am proud of her. She has achieved the success we both hoped and worked for—through private schools, travel abroad, summer programs, enrichment opportunities, and family activities. We step out on the roof for some air. One distinguished female scholar, who was on the committee that awarded her a prize for her senior thesis, sidles up: "So what are you going to do with all that Greek and Latin now?" "That's really up to God, isn't it," she replies coolly, meeting her eyes. I

keep reminding myself of Thomas Aquinas' dictum: The end of all learning is love of God. "She is just skipping the middle steps," I tell myself and others again and again. Who wouldn't be proud of that?

But I am disappointed, too. She won't be going through the long-anticipated rituals of academic accreditation, and I won't be offering all the cheers, consolations, and advice I have stored up. And I am worried. Is this a free choice or an unhealthy compulsion, born of some deep-seated neurosis or fear or wound? Will she be safe and healthy and happy? Can we see her, and how often, and on whose say-so? She will never have a husband. She will never have children. What about all that nurturing love and motherly good sense she showed her brother Dan and younger sisters, Rachel and Rosie, babysitting, helping her parents, organizing chores, providing entertainment? And, of course, she will always be a beggar, despite her talents and the tens of thousands of dollars spent in tuition. (The IRS and the alumni surveys have yet to provide a category marked "No income now or ever.")

So, a second-generation Italian American Catholic, I have mixed feelings. No easy, comfortable path for my eldest daughter, no grandchildren, and no success in the new world, at least as people conventionally construe both success and that world. But it is some consolation to think that there may be larger rhythms at play here. My mother reminds me that her mother, Francesca Cappadona, spent her youth in a convent in Italy.

Christine found her vocation during her year abroad in Rome, which had coincided with the 2000 Jubilee. "In Rome I tried to be normal, to stay away from daily Mass," she says, "but I was miserable. I needed to go to church. And all around the city I kept running into those blue habits. Those women were so joyful and peaceful and free."

I tried to reason with her: "You are going into a Servants of the Lord novitiate, and that is by definition a time to try things out, to discern. Take it easy and see if it is right for you." "No," she told me firmly, "I love passionately and want to give everything now—no holding back."

"You should use the talents God gave you and the education I paid for," I respond, all but oblivious to the folly of that coordination. "You can work in a soup kitchen and feed twenty or you can write food-stamp legislation and feed twenty thousand." She shakes her head and looks at me with amusement and, perhaps, a touch of pity.

**I**n January 2004, Sr. Maria del Fiat (formerly Christine Miola) is walking in step with three other sisters, carrying a heavy backpack of books up the hill to the Centro di Alti Studi. Elderly Italian ladies,

wrapped in shawls, call out to chat and hug and scold Sr. Fiat in mock anger for not visiting often enough. She laughs with them and asks about their aches and pains. They give full reports and talk about their husbands, children, and grandchildren. They invite us for coffee.

When we arrive at the Centro she introduces me to her students, seminarians as well as sisters from South America, Europe, and Africa. "Who knows more Latin, you or La Maestra?" Fr. Mario asks me, with a mischievous grin. She begins class with a prayer and then gets right to the Latin drills, conducted in Italian. That afternoon I give a lecture on early-modern Jesuit martyrs. I tell them of St. Philip Neri, who used to greet seminarians at the English College in Rome with the phrase, *Salvete flores martyrum*, "Hail, flowers of martyrs." I tell them of Edmund Campion, ministering in disguise and secret to Catholics, evading detection but challenging all of Protestant England to debate: "We shall never despair your recovery while we have a man left to enjoy your Tyburn, or to be racked with your torments, or to be consumed with your prisons. The expense is reckoned. The enterprise is begun; it is of God, it cannot be withstood."

I have given the lecture a hundred times but this one is different. The air crackles with an electric attention and energy. A half hour later I see four seminarians from the back of the room standing together in the piazza. "*Salvete flores martyrum*," I say in jest. Andres, a handsome Argentinian priest with a beautiful tenor voice, closes his eyes and responds immediately, "*Utinam*"—Would it were so.

That night I meet my daughter in the small convent chapel, cut out of a mountain side, for Vespers. It is cold and windy but the stone chapel is warm with candlelight; the nuns kneel in silent adoration. Sr. Fiat plays a small organ and leads the hymns, *Tantum Ergo*, *Salve Regina*, her voice high and clear. The psalms and antiphons echo in the Italian night. The sisters kiss their breviaries before closing them.

**B**ut then, in 2005, I find myself saying with dismay, "You can't be serious." Another daughter, Rachel this time, looks at me with deep blue eyes. Her lip quivers. Robert Kaske's book of medieval sources, my gift to her before she heads to graduate school at Notre Dame, sits on the table, already a relic from another dispensation.

"You are wholly different from Chrissy and wholly unfit for that life," I insist. "She loves rules and you can't stand them. You were a feminist at the University of Chicago, and this is a life of submission and obedience."

She struggles to remain calm. "It's not a matter of rules or my sister. It's not even a matter of who I am, and, I'm not sure you know me anymore anyway.

Don't you trust that I have thought about this at length?" Her temperature rises. "Do you really want to argue with joy now and the hope of eternal life later?" she says sharply.

"There are no guarantees for eternal life," I retort, my temperature rising. "Are you sure you are not just following your big sister?" I charge, half-conscious of the absurdity of the question, posed as it is to my most flamboyant and theatrical daughter, always fiercely independent. "Or perhaps it's just a coincidence that no one we know enters religious life and you follow your sister in the same choice, in the same order?"

"There are a lot of ways to serve God," I lecture. "Human love is good. Are you afraid of human love, afraid of marriage, afraid of sex?"

"Daaad," she rolls her eyes in exasperation.

"Listen, Ray," I plead, "ten years from now you will wake up and discover that this life is not or ever was right for you; then you will be too strapped with guilt and an ethic of self-abnegation to do anything about it. Why don't you proceed along with your graduate-school plans or go for a year and enter later if you still want to?"

"I already told them I am not coming. I told them to give the fellowship to someone else." I feel a fiery swirl of panic, fear, and anger rise up. Scenes from her life flash before me—reading books together on the porch in blankets, her performances in high-school cross-country and theater; her study of medieval Latin paleography in college; her gaining entrance to the Vatican library, officially closed to undergraduates; her pluck; her swing dancing.

I close with brutal sarcasm, feeling cut off, confused, dizzy from worry and anger. I rise from the table, saying, "I'm sorry, Ray. I love you, but I can't support a course of action I think is wrong for you. I don't think I can see you anymore. Maybe that is part of your cross."

"That would make me very sad," she says, as her blue eyes fill slowly with tears.

**I**n Washington, October 2008, I watch Sr. Panagia (formerly Rachel Miola) in action, poised and purposeful. Of course I have seen her many times after that painful day in 2005—in fact, the very next day, filled with love, contrition, and anxiety—but I have rarely seen her in *in propria persona* before.

The children seek her out, and she kneels to see them eye to eye, producing holy cards and medals for them from the mysterious folds of the habit. They are mesmerized. Some adults lead her to the side for confidential and intense conversation, sharing their stories and (I assume from their expressions) their griefs. She moves naturally and easily through the crowd of

strangers, young and old; everyone wants to talk to her.

I watch Sr. Fiat, my older daughter, prepare for the ceremony, the declaration of her final vows, and I see her pray and tremble in anticipation, watched by her father and her younger sister, in habit. The priests and sisters process in. The cardinal formally and finally accepts Sr. Fiat and five others, after more than seven years of intense prayer and preparation, as spouses of Christ. At the climactic moment at the altar in the crypt, she stands up and says, "Lord, you have called me; here I am." She makes "an oblation to God of all my being . . . in order to be a concrete imprint which the Trinity leaves in history that all men may discover the attraction and longing for the divine beauty." She vows to remain "forever chaste, for the sake of the kingdom of heaven, forever poor, manifesting that God is the only true wealth for man, forever obedient, even to death on the cross."

My little girl, now twenty-nine, lies prostrate while a priest intones the litany of the saints, calling each to witness and help her fulfill her vow—the Virgin Mary, St. Peter, St. Paul, St. Thomas Aquinas, Padre Pio, Elizabeth Ann Seton, the angels, one by one, St. Teresa, St. Joseph, St. Francis, a divine roll call. Crowned with a wreath of flowers, she completes the mystical marriage by taking a ring on her right hand—my father's wedding ring. My mother, kneeling behind me, weeps for joy to see their marital love thus renewed. At times it seems the thousand others in the grand cathedral fade away and there is no one else there but my daughters.

Many people congratulate me after, as if I had something to do with all that. "You must be very proud,"

they say, but the opposite is true. I am embarrassed at how poor a part I have played in their lives. I am humbled into silence to see the girls I helped bring into the world, diapered, assisted with homework, watched on playing fields, paid tuition for—now turned into holy persons of God, missionaries, radiant with presence and power.

What does it all mean? I've been thinking about those lines from T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*, verses I inscribed to Sr. Panagia the day she took the habit: *to apprehend / The point of intersection of the timeless / With time, is an occupation for the saint*. Most of us live our lives experiencing normal pleasures and normal pains. Occasionally we experience something beyond all that, something of grace, another reality.

But they live every day in that reality, in the gentle constant presence of Christ. It is our world of power, pleasure, pain, and pride that is secondary, shadowy, and unreal. Unimaginable, one might say, but there they are, laughing and praying, singing and working, emptied of disordered passions and filled with peace. There they are, big as life, robed in grey and blue.

At the reception they talk with excitement of missions they have just visited—Sr. Fiat in Ireland, Sr. Panagia in Guyana. Everything seems new and possible. I breathe prayers for their health and safety and happiness, and for that of all my children. I have no idea what's next for any of them. But then again, *Deo gratias ago*, I never did.

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## The Return of the Golden Age

Apache rotors, envying windmills no more,  
Thresh the air wheat-gold. On lonely state routes  
We can witness them whisper the harvest.  
They idle gently, no intention to ascend.  
A fine, dry chaff gilds the passing windshield.  
Where are the wars that whet these blades? Far off,  
Far off and not involving us, at last  
Happily powerless and eating well,  
The machines that enslaved clouds and tides  
Stripped down to serve our long abandoned land  
And the boys who left these bright, genuine fields  
For fool's gold deserts home now, wizened men,  
Poor as the wise are poor, flush with enough.

—Amit Majmudar