

# The Nourishing word. The symbolism of milk in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages

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Abstract:

Nutrition meant many things to late antique and medieval Christians. It is important to remember that essential for them were fasting and participation in the Eucharist; these practices were fundamental ways to praise God and to acknowledge their sinfulness. They received God most personally and intimately in the holy meal in which he became bread and wine, and also in milk-consumption and/or offering. That because milk, especially in its capacity of maternal nourishment, was perceived as both biological and mystical, and as an indication as to how the earthly and heavenly realities intertwine. Miraculous occurrences of lactation were frequently reported in the Middle Ages and they involved, interestingly, both women and men. My presentation will introduce some of the texts and images illustrating these assertions.

## The Nourishing word. The symbolism of milk in the Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages

### 1. Scripture and Patristics

#### 1. i. Nourishment in general

In the Bible, the Divine Liturgy, and Patristic literature, Christ is represented as the food of life or the bread from heaven, whereas Mary is presented either as *his* source of nutrition, as the vehicle through which the sustenance that is Christ reaches humanity, or sometimes as the recipient of nurture herself; we shall see further here that she is even given milk to drink – the only adult recorded in Christian literature as consuming it. The artists that depicted the scene of *Maria lactans* might have had in mind the Virgin's ability to offer nourishment.



Fig.1. *Maria Galaktotrophousa* [Mary breastfeeding], 1784, 480 × 640 cm, Byzantine Museum, Thessaloniki, Greece. This image is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 2.5 Generic license.

Texts articulate art and also circulate conceptual imagery; that in addition to allowing themselves to be surrounded by visual representations. The first Christians believed that the idea of Mary as the vessel for Christ was foreseen in the Old Testament through similes such as the jar containing *manna*, the altar inside the tabernacle, and the oven in which the offering for Yahweh was baked. Also these early Christian thinkers, most of them living in the Byzantine Empire or within its area of influence, believed that the sustenance the Virgin offered to the Son of God did not originate in her own body. Nevertheless, works have been penned maintaining that, in relation to the milk in her breasts, Mary's role was not restricted exclusively to that of a receptacle, as we can see in the *History of Aur*<sup>1</sup> where Mary has control over it. She refused to give milk to some Egyptian magicians because they wanted to use it for a selfish, non-natural purpose – to obtain immortality.

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<sup>1</sup> E. A. T. W. Budge (ed. and trans.), “History of Aur”, Part II, 7 in *Egyptian Tales and Legends: Pagan, Christian, Muslim*, Dover Publications, New York, 2002, pp. 247-264. Additionally, Cyril of Alexandria, “The Discourse on Mary Theotokos”, Ms. Oriental 6784, in Budge (ed. and trans.), *Miscellaneous Coptic Texts in the Dialect of Upper Egypt*. According to Cyril, Mary testifies about her milk: “My womb grew large without [the help of] a man, and my breasts became full of milk. I never held converse with any young man. I suffered no pain when I brought forth. I was not frightened. I saw my Child. I did not know whence I had conceived”; fols. 31b 1 and 31 b 2, pp. 49-74, trans. on p. 719; for other milk references see also pp. 717-719. In Ms. Oriental 67842, the same collection, Epiphanius of Salamis says “Blessed are thy breasts wherewith thou didst nourish the Creator for three years”, fol. 26 b 1, trans. on p. 714; further mention of Mary's breasts is on p. 701. He also refers generally to her parents and ancestors on pp. 701-702.

Many specialists – among them Elizabeth S. Bolman,<sup>2</sup> Mary Cunningham,<sup>3</sup> and Zuzana Skalova<sup>4</sup> – have interpreted the nourishment the Virgin/*Theotokos* provided for the infant Jesus as being similar in nature to that which He himself offers to humankind, according to John 6. 35, among other sources: “I am the bread of life. He who comes to Me shall never hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst”. Such expressions involving food with reference to Christ are recurrent in the Gospels – he was also thought as bread, the true vine (John 15.1), and the water of everlasting life (John 4.14).

1. ii. Milk nourishing/ i.e. breastfeeding. The meaning of this act in Bible and the writings of the Church Fathers

Since our discussion is about these, we shall focus on nursing and milk as constituting particular metaphors (two of many) which illustrate the idea that God – both the Father and the Son, or rather the Godhead – is the Nourisher of humankind. He was represented sometimes as a [nursing] mother in the Old Testament, for instance in Job 21. 24 (“His breasts are full of milk”), and Isaiah 49.15, where it is said that the Lord cannot overlook us because a mother does not forget ‘her suckling child’. In the Vetro-Testamentary texts milk is mentioned together with honey.<sup>5</sup> In the New Covenant, the Logos as the milk that feeds

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<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth S. Bolman, “The Coptic *Galaktotrophousa* Revisited”, *Abstracts of Papers: Seventh International Congress of Coptic Studies in Leiden, 27 August-2 September 2000*, Leiden, 2000, and “The enigmatic Coptic *Galaktotrophousa*” in Maria Vassilaki (ed.), *Images of the Mother of God. Perceptions of the Theotokos in Byzantium*, Ashgate, Aldershot, 2005, pp. 13-19. See also her Fellowship Report on-line, Dumbarton Oaks, 2004/2005, retrieved June 2012. Bolman is currently writing a book entitled *The Milk of Salvation? Gender, Audience and the Nursing Virgin Mary in the Eastern Mediterranean*. This is based on her doctoral dissertation *The Coptic ‘Galaktotrophousa’ as the Medicine of Immortality*, University of Brynn Mawr 1999. See also Hildreth York and Betty L. Schlossman, “She Shall Be Called Woman: Ancient near Eastern Sources of Imagery”, in *Woman's Art Journal*, vol. 2/no. 2, 1982, pp. 37-41.

<sup>3</sup> Mary B. Cunningham, “Divine Banquet”, in Leslie Brubaker, Kallirroë Linardou (eds.), *Eat, Drink, and Be Merry (Luke 12:19). Food and Wine in Byzantium*, Papers of the 37th Annual Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies, Aldershot 2007.

<sup>4</sup> Zuzana Skalova, “The Icon of the Virgin *Galaktotrophousa* in the Coptic Monastery of St Anthony the Great at the Red Sea, Egypt: A preliminary note”, in K. Ciggaar and H. Teule (eds.), *East and West in the Crusader States: Context-Contacts-Confrontations: Acta of the Congress Held at Hernen Castle in September 2000*, Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta 125, Leuven and Dudley M.A. 2003, pp. 235-264.

<sup>5</sup> Exodus 3. 8: “So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey--the home of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusi.”; Deuteronomy 26:9, “And thou shalt write upon them all the

people, τὸ λογικὸν ἄδολον γάλα, is commented on in 1 Peter 2.2; other passages as, for instance, Gal. 4.19, 1 Cor. 4.14, and the Gospel of John could be interpreted as speaking about the same. Here the verb τρέφω/θρέφω – participle τρεφόμενος and τρεφομένους (which means both nourishing in general and breastfeeding) is used in Mt. 6.26 and 25.35 in the general sense.

With respect to specifically breastfeeding, we are used to think of it as a rather private biological act. Still, if additionally it is invested with spiritual value and is seen not only as a physical, but also as a metaphysical reality, then its description in terms usually employed when referring to sacred realities is not as surprising as it might first appear.

Among the Church Fathers, Clement of Alexandria (c. 150 - c. 215 AD) mentions milk a few times. For him, Christ is not only a nurse, but also the milk he promised to his people – it is “the drink of immortality”<sup>6</sup> and the Logos; as such it has the same composition as his flesh and blood. The medical knowledge of his time informed Clement that milk is “the most succulent and subtle part”<sup>7</sup> of the blood and that it is white in order to be less frightening to people, especially to the young ones. (Hippocrates, 460-377 BC, believed that milk is blood, and his theory was still prevalent in the second Christianity century.<sup>8</sup>) Galen of Pergamon (c.129 - c. 210 AD) advised people to consume milk and its derivative products, and explained their qualities; he also used it as a medicine.<sup>9</sup> Clement understands milk, like St. Paul whose sayings he quotes, as being the metaphor for the “simple, true natural, and

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words of this law, when thou art passed over, that thou mayest go in unto the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee, a land that floweth with milk and honey; as the Lord God of thy fathers hath promised thee.”

<sup>6</sup> Clement of Alexandria, “Paedagogus”, PG 8, 300-301, or Henri-Irénée Marrou (ed.), *Paed.*, 1.6. 36, pp. 174-175. More information on the meaning of Mary’s milk in Egyptian Patristics is to be found in Elizabeth S. Bolman, “The enigmatic Coptic Galaktotrophousa and the cult of Virgin Mary in Egypt” in Maria Vassilaki, *Images of the Mother of God*, pp. 13-22.

<sup>7</sup> Clement of Alexandria, “Paedagogus”, PG 8, 1. 6. 300-301; Marrou (ed.), *Clément d’Alexandrie. Le pédagogue*, trans. M. Harl, I. 6. 39. 1, 2, (SC, 70), Éditions du CERF, 1960, vol. 1, pp. 182-183. See also Clementis Alexandrini/M. Marcovich and J. C. M. van Winden (eds.), *Paedagogus*, Brill, Leiden, Boston, 2002.

<sup>8</sup> Hippocrates, *Glands*, 16, trans. P. Potter, Loeb Classical Library, vol. 8, Cambridge, 1988, p. 123. See also Elizabeth M. Craik, *The Hippocratic Treatise on Glands*, Brill, Boston, 2000, pp. xvi, xvii, 81.

<sup>9</sup> Galen of Pergamon, *Galen: on food and diet*, Mark Grant (transl. and notes], Routledge, London, 2000, Book 3, pp. 163-168 and on cheese, pp. 169-170.

spiritual nourishment” that the Logos (‘Christ’s milk’) is; it constitutes the ‘perfect’ sustenance for the righteous in order for them to attain eternal life. The ‘already-perfected’ drink it with joy because it also leads to the knowledge of truth; those who are yet as ‘little children’ in faith, just suck the milk [to live].<sup>10</sup> When, in *Cohortatio ad Gentes*, the theologian from Alexandria says that people can correct their dogmatic mistakes as they mature in faith, he again makes the analogy with milk, and rhetorically asks why “do we not still use our first nourishment, milk, to which our nurses accustomed us from the time of our birth” (?). The answer he provides is that we no longer do this because “we have corrected ourselves”.<sup>11</sup> In further support to the idea of divine sustenance, in chapter 9 of the same work, Clement quotes the urging of the Psalm: “Taste and see that Christ is good!” (Ps. 34. 8).<sup>12</sup>

St. Ephrem the Syrian (c. 306 - 373) states in his Nativity hymn that Jesus “is the Breast of Life, and the Breath of Life; the dead suck from His life and revive. Without the breath of the air no man lived, without the Might of the Son no man subsisted. On His living breath that quickened all, depend the spirits that are above and that are beneath. When he suckled the milk of Mary, He was suckling all with Life”.<sup>13</sup> And further he writes: “Whilst He was increasing in stature among the poor, from an abundant treasury *He was nourishing all!* While she that anointed Him was anointing Him, with His dew and his rain He was dropping

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<sup>10</sup> Clement of Alexandria, “Paedagogus”, PG 8. 300-301; Marrou (ed.), *Paedagogus*, I. 6, pp. 182-183.

<sup>11</sup> Clement of Alexandria, “Cohortatio ad Gentes”, PG 8. 10. 201A, and Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (eds.), “Answer the objection of the Heathen that it was not right to abandon the custom of their fathers”, in *The Works of Clement of Alexandria*, vol. 1, Ante-Nicene Christian Library. Translations of the Writings of the Fathers down to AD 325 (vol. 4), T & T Clark, Edinburgh, 1857, p. 85. See also Ph. Schaff, and H. Wace (eds.), *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, second series, “Exhortation to the Heathen”, vol. 14: *I Nice AD 325*, H. R. Percival (trans.), Charles Scribner's Sons, 1900; apparently it has been reprinted by Hendrickson Publishers, 2012, but I have not managed to see this new edition.

<sup>12</sup> Clement of Alexandria, “Cohortatio ad Gentes”, PG 8. 9. 199B, and A. Roberts and J. Donaldson, “Exhortation to the Heathen. That those grievously six who despise or neglect God’s gracious calling”, in *The Works of Clement of Alexandria*, p. 83.

<sup>13</sup> Ephrem the Syrian /J. B. Morris (ed. and trans.), “Rhythms of Saint Ephrem the Syrian. Hymn (‘Rhythm’) the Third”, in *Selected Works of S. Ephrem the Syrian*, John Henry Parker, Oxford, 1847, p. 18; the translation has been slightly modified. See also Ephrem the Syrian, “Hymn on the Nativity 4” (H. Nat. 4), in *Hymns*, Kathleen E. McVey (trans.), Classics of Western Spirituality, Mahwah, NJ, Paulist Press, 1989. There are aspects in Morris’s translation that better suit the purpose of the book.

fatness over all! [...] It was by Power from Him that Mary was able to bear in Her bosom Him that bears up all things! It was from the great storehouse of all creatures; Mary gave him all which she did give Him! She gave Him milk from Himself that prepared it, she gave Him food from Himself that made it! He gave milk unto Mary as God: again He sucked it from her, as the Son of Man”.<sup>14</sup>

Another father of the Church, Gregory of Nyssa (c. 335 - c. 395), describes how Jesus Christ introduced those around him to the mysteries of the Resurrection gradually, by healing various diseases, before bringing back to life Lazarus and eventually himself. He acted in the same manner as a mother who first feeds an infant with her milk and changes to bread when the child grows up and can consume it.<sup>15</sup> Also, in his *Homilies on the Song of Songs*, Nyssen speaks about the Bridegroom’s kisses as being identical in significance to the milk that flows from his breasts [μαστοί]<sup>16</sup> (which “are better than wine”<sup>17</sup>). The breasts are important for their proximity to the heart (‘the treasure house’), because, as the bishop says, “from it the breasts acquire their abundance of the divine milk on which, ‘according to the proportion of faith’ (Rom. 12. 6), the soul feeds as it draws in grace”.<sup>18</sup>

Augustine (354 - 430) also wrote about motherhood and conceived God as being like milk for humankind. He considered that the image of a human mother or a wet-nurse feeding

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<sup>14</sup> Ephrem the Syrian/Morris (ed. and trans.), “Rhythms of Saint Ephrem the Syrian. Hymn the Third”, pp. 23-24; the translation has been slightly modified and emphasis added. Also in Ephrem the Syrian, “Hymn on the Nativity 3” in *Hymns*, K. E. McVey (trans.).

<sup>15</sup> The Lord “makes first of all a prelude of the power of resurrection in healing various diseases” by “nourishing and fostering with miracles the weakness of the human mind, like some babe not fully grown”; Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Making of Man*, in H. Wace and P. Schaff (eds.), *A Selected Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* (NPNF), vol. V, 1893, p. 415.

<sup>16</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, “Homily 1”, in *Homilies on the Song of Songs* / Gregory of Nyssa; translated with an introduction and notes by Richard. A. Norris Jr., in John T. Fitzgerald (gen. ed.), *Writings from the Greco-Roman World*, vol. 13, The Society of Biblical Literature, 2012, Atlanta, GA, p. 35. See also *Saint Gregory of Nyssa: Commentary on the Song of Songs*. Casimir McCambley (trans.), Archbishop Iakovos Library of Ecclesiastical and Historical Sources, no. 12, Hellenic College Press, Brookline, 1987.

<sup>17</sup> The Song of Songs, 2. “Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth, /For your breasts are better than wine”. 4. [...] let us rejoice and be glad in thee; we will love thy breasts more than wine: righteousness loves thee.” *Canticum Canticorum. Vetus Latina*, Albertus Vaccari S. J. (ed.), trans. A. S. Hieronymo, Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, Rome, 1959, p. 19.

<sup>18</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, “Homily 1”, in *Homilies on the Song of Songs*, p. 35.

the child in their care is quintessential for both spiritual and biological nourishment. But for him other people – even men – could also take (and indeed have taken) the role of a mother.

As said, the bishop of Hippo has firstly God in his mind when deploying motherly imagery (because He is both merciful and just – as mothers are); he states “When He came to us robed in flesh, He turned His Wisdom into milk for us”.<sup>19</sup> But the prelate also applies this analogy to the Church, to Moses who took care of the Israelites with maternal love (“his love is almost that of a mother”; “Moses's maternal instincts were roused”),<sup>20</sup> to St. Paul’s who describes himself as a nurse in 1 Cor. 4. 14-16, 1 Thess. 2.7 and Heb. 5.11-14, in which he had to give to those people who were like “little ones” “milk to drink, not meat” or “solid food”, and to himself when performing for the recently baptised “the sweet offices of a nurse”.<sup>21</sup>

Inserting some elements from his personal history in an imaginary dialogue with the Creator, he writes in this context about his mother Monica and the wet-nurse who fed him as a baby: “I was welcomed by the consolations of human milk; but it was not my mother or my nurse who made any decision to fill their breasts, but you who through them gave me infant food, in accordance with your ordinance and the riches which are deep in the natural order. You also granted me not to wish for more than you were giving, and to my nurses the desire to give me what you gave them. For by an impulse which you control their instinctive wish was to give me the milk which they had in abundance from you. For the good which came from them was a good for them; yet it was not from them but through them. Indeed all good things come from you, O God, and ‘from my God is *all my salvation*’ (2 Sam. 23.5).”<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Saint Augustine, “En 30, Sermon 1”, 9; *The Works of Saint Augustine*; electronic edition (second release for the Bodleian Library; retrieved April 2014); Charlottesville, Virginia, InteLex Corporation, 2001 - edition information: ISBN: 978-1-57085-657-0.

<sup>20</sup> Saint Augustine, “Sermon 88”, 24; idem.

<sup>21</sup> Saint Augustine, “Sermon 353”, 1.

<sup>22</sup> Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1991, pp. 6-7; emphasis added.

Augustine, on another level of discussion – the spiritual – also often speaks about our “milk of faith”<sup>23</sup> and its connection to the “Wisdom of God”. He also expresses the idea of a protective and universal Nourisher (and about himself suckling at God’s breast, Confessions 4.1). God is ultimately the Mother and so is his incarnate Wisdom (cf. Proverbs 5. 1, 19).

The bishop explains, as Clement did earlier, that once people grow up spiritually, they feed through “contemplative union” with God because it is He: “Who creates you. You are being suckled, praise Him; being fed, praise Him. But to what end this suckling and feeding? You are being nourished to advance in age and wisdom.”<sup>24</sup> He cautions the listeners to his sermon – and us, his readers– to the radical difference between what is taking place when the body of a mother transforms any other food into milk and what happens when the Word of God becomes incarnate: the difference consists in the fact that “[the] Word, remaining unchangeably itself, assumed flesh, in order to be in some way combined with it. It did not dissolve, nor change what it is in order to speak to you through your condition; he was not transmuted and changed into a man. Being nonconvertible, you see, and unchangeable, and remaining altogether inviolable, he became what you are in relation to you, remaining what he is in himself in relation to the Father.”<sup>25</sup>

There were other theologians who wrote about the act of giving nourishment – particularly of milk – as both a corporeal and spiritual endeavour, notably among them Gregory the Great (c. 540 - 604) and, in the British isles, Richard Rolle (1290/1300 - 1349). But within the remit of this conference, we shall focus especially on Bernard of Clairvaux’s experiences concerning milk.

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<sup>23</sup> Saint Augustine, “En 30, Sermon 1”, 9 and “Sermon 2”, 1; *The Works of Saint Augustine*; electronic edition (second release for the Bodleian Library; retrieved April 2014); see comments on this ‘Enarratione/Exposition’, in R. J. O’Connell, *Soundings in St. Augustine’s imagination*, pp. 116-122 (for the “milk of faith”, p. 120).

<sup>24</sup> Saint Augustine, “Sermon 216”, 7; idem.

<sup>25</sup> Saint Augustine, “Sermon 147a”, 16, p. 220.

## Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153)

In the Middle Ages, miraculous occurrences of lactation were frequently reported, and they involved, interestingly, both women and men. Among others, the mystic Bernard of Clairvaux received milk in a vision. He wrote two sermons about this nutritious liquid and also mentioned it in other places.<sup>26</sup> Bernard considered (and according to him this was also Solomon's perception) that the 'breasts' praised in the Song of Songs represent the divine attributes of mercy and patience, and the human virtues of compassion and sympathy; they also symbolise "the doctrine and means of grace dispensed by the Church."<sup>27</sup>

With regard to his vision, it was of a statue in which Mary issued milk from her breast in order to heal an eye ailment Bernard suffered from.<sup>28</sup> In other variants of the account concerning this mystical happening, the saint knelt down in front of such a statue and asked the Virgin, "Show yourself to be a mother!" Afterwards, while he was in prayer or in a dream, she responded by pressing her breast and nourishing him with her milk. The story went across Europe and was iconographically represented in various periods especially in Spain and Belgium. In the former country that happened as early as 1290 through the hands of the Master of La Palma (fig. 2); his painting is today in the care of the Sociedad Arqueológica Luliana, Palma de Mallorca (fig. 2). There are more versions of that image in Spain, for instance one from 1460 made by the Master of Osma, Soria (Burgos province), now kept by El Burgo de Osma, and one from c. 1650 by Alonso Cano, now in the Museum of Prado, Madrid (fig. 3), where two other images exist; few others works are in various museum and galleries across Spain.

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<sup>26</sup> Bernard of Clairvaux, "On the breasts of the Bride and Bridegroom", "The breasts and their perfumes", and also "In the room of the King", in Killian Walsh (ed. and trans.), *Sermons on the Song of Songs*, Cistercian Publications-CSS, Kalamazoo, MI, 2005, vols. 1-2; sermons 9, 10, and 24.

<sup>27</sup> Thomas Cattoi and June McDaniel, *Perceiving the Divine through the human body*, Palgrave MacMillan, New York, 2011, p. 168. Some suggestions might be found also in David Howes and Constance Classen, *Ways of Sensing. Understanding the senses in society*, Routledge, Abingdon, UK and New York, 2014.

<sup>28</sup> In Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* there are two reproductions of this scene: Plate 18 – Lactation of St. Bernard by the Master of Palma –, and Plate 19 – Lactation of St. Bernard by Master of Osma; both images are black and white.



Fig. 2. The vision of St. Bernard, Master of La Palma, 1290, today at the Sociedad Arqueológica Luliana, Palma de Mallorca; 1290, [https://www.google.co.uk/?gws\\_rd=ssl#q=princeton+index+of+christian+art](https://www.google.co.uk/?gws_rd=ssl#q=princeton+index+of+christian+art); retrieved June 2013.



Fig. 3. The miraculous lactation of St Bernard de Clairvaux, Alonso Cano, c. 1650, Museo del Prado/ Prado Museum, Madrid; image sourced in [https://www.google.co.uk/?gws\\_rd=ssl#q=princeton+index+of+christian+art](https://www.google.co.uk/?gws_rd=ssl#q=princeton+index+of+christian+art); retrieved June 2013.

Also this miracle was rendered in various forms (sometimes with the breast near Bernard's lips), for instance in a painting by Simon Marmion, about 1475-1480, J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, and with a simple Virgin and child image on a cloud – a kind of mandorla – in the sixteenth century work by Juan Correa de Vivar hosted by Prado Museum. In 1480 the Flemish school created their own version of Bernard's vision that is presently displayed in the Musée d'Art Religieux d'Art Mosan, Liège.

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Building on narratives about the experience of the Cistercian, Caroline Walker Bynum comments that for this mystic, "the maternal image is almost without exception elaborated [...] as a nurturing, particularly suckling [one]." She expounds on this and on his *Epistola* 144, in which he expresses affection for his spiritual sons in his abbey.<sup>29</sup> She goes into the details of to whom Bernard ascribes maternal characteristics – to abbots, and particularly to himself since he is one of them: "Breasts, to Bernard, are a symbol of the pouring out towards others of affectivity or of instruction and almost invariably suggest to him a discussion of the duties of prelates or heads of religious communities. Bernard not only develops an elaborate picture of the abbot as mother; he also frequently attributes maternal characteristics, especially suckling with milk, to the abbot when he refers to him as father."<sup>30</sup>

When offered, milk is sometimes accompanied by other foods – and not only in the known case of baptismal Eucharist cup that contains both this liquid and honey when given to the catechumen in the Coptic Church.<sup>31</sup> For instance, St. Ephrem the Syrian affirms that the Magi, in addition to bringing "praise" and a "suckling lamb for the Paschal Lamb" at Nativity, also brought meat ("clean flesh") for Joseph to eat and "sweet milk" for the Virgin to drink.<sup>32</sup> They returned to Christ-God by physical means that nourishment which God had already offered them both spiritually and corporally. (St. Ephrem also acknowledges elsewhere the bringing of myrrh and gold as returning gifts: "while in Him was hidden a treasure of riches. The myrrh and spices which He had prepared and created, did the Magi

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<sup>29</sup> Bernard of Clairvaux, "Letter 144", in *Santi Bernardi opera [OB]*, eds. J. Leclercq and H. M. Rochais, Editiones Cistercienses, Rome, 1974, vol. 7 (Corpus Epistolarum), pp. 344-346.

<sup>30</sup> Caroline Walker Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, 1984 (first edition University of California Press, 1982), pp. 115-116.

<sup>31</sup> Elizabeth S. Bolman, "The enigmatic Coptic Galaktotrophousa", p. 19.

<sup>32</sup> Ephrem the Syrian /Morris, "Rhythms of Saint Ephrem. Hymn the third", pp. 23-24. Also in Ephrem the Syrian, "Hymn on the Nativity 3", in *Hymns*, trans..K. E. McVey

bring Him of His own”<sup>33</sup>). This is perhaps the only place in the writings of the Fathers of the Church where milk is given to the Mother of God, and in general to someone beyond the age of childhood. The fact verifies that milk has been conceived in time not only as nutrition for the immature, but also for other people close to God; children are, and so is Christ’s Mother.

Augustine elaborates on the significance of the connection milk – meat. In Sermon 147a. 16, he affirms that in the divine mysteries people pass from milk to solid food. He states (in Sermon 15) that when Christ appears “*we shall be like him, since we shall see him as he is* (1 John 3:2). That is what we are promised.” The bishop emphasises that in order for that to be possible, “if we cannot yet see the Word as God, let us listen to the Word as flesh. Because we have become flesh-bound, materialistic, let us listen to the Word who became flesh. The reason he has come, you see, the reason he has taken upon himself our infirmity, is so that you may be able to receive a firm discourse of God, as he bears your infirmity. And it is very properly called milk, because he is giving milk to the little ones, so that he may give them the solid food of wisdom when they are grown up. Take the milk patiently, in order later on to be able to feed on the solid food avidly. I mean, how is even the milk produced on which babies are breastfed? Wasn’t there some solid food on the table? But the baby is incapable of eating the solid food on the table. So what does the mother do? She incarnates the food and produces milk from it. She produces for us what we are capable of taking. In the same way the Word became flesh, so that we little ones might be nourished on milk being babies still with respect to solid food.”<sup>34</sup> Nevertheless, as noticed, milk is not only about immaturity and human fragility (as implied in 1 Cor. 4. 14-16, a text which Augustine was probably evoking), but also about holiness and life after death. Paradise itself, as known, is described as the place where milk and honey abound.

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<sup>33</sup> Ephrem the Syrian /Morris, “Rhythms of Saint Ephrem. Hymn the third”, pp. 23-24. Also in Ephrem the Syrian, “Hymn on the Nativity 3”, in *Hymns*, trans.K. E. McVey.

<sup>34</sup> Saint Augustine, “Sermon 147a. 15, 16”, in *Sermons (94A-147A) on the Old Testament*; The Works of Saint Augustine, electronic edition (third release), v. III/4, pp. 219-220.