

Christmas and Childbirth: A Mother's Reflections*

by Joan M. Haugk †

A crisis is one of life's turning points. Though the critical point of decision or experience may itself be small, it frequently bears lifelong consequences. Every life crisis holds within it potential for both serious harm and significant growth. Thus, a crisis could be described as a pregnant time—full of meaning and mystery and potential.

Pregnancy, giving birth, and becoming a family are times of crisis. Parents, especially mothers, face very real dangers at this time. But God also grants them special gifts and opportunities. Because childbirth is one of the most critical and deeply moving experiences of life, it offers a special experience of the presence of God.

The mystery of a life being created, nurtured, and brought forth is as awesome each time it occurs as the thought of Jesus the divine becoming human through Mary. Our own experience of becoming a family gives us a shared history with the Holy Family, one that allows us to journey into the world of Mary, the mother

of Jesus, and to see what she might have experienced.

Like other mothers, Mary must have *wondered*, "How can this be?" The news of pregnancy also conveys a sense of awe and carries with it feelings of disbelief: How can one person be carrying another? How can one be eating for two? Small wonder that Mary and countless mothers like her feel compelled to sing, "My soul doth magnify the Lord!"



Mary was "great with child." She felt a sense of *fullness*. Perhaps she enjoyed the specialness of pregnancy. As the discomforts of pregnancy increased, she grew in her understanding of living sacrificially. No longer was she able to think only of herself in what she did

or ate. In a real sense, she was giving up parts of herself for another person.

Mary felt a sense of *aloneness*. There were some real questions and uncertainties. Would Joseph be there for her? Would anyone understand what she was experiencing? Would she be able to communicate her needs? One need was to visit her cousin Elizabeth. Every woman in labor knows the terror of the possibility of being left alone. Perhaps, for the first time in her life, Mary experienced what it means to need people who could be there for her. Although others could "watch and wait with her," her body alone would be involved in performing this birth.

Like other mothers, Mary felt a sense of *changing and being changed*. Physically and emotionally she experienced sensations she had never experienced before. Would she ever be the same again? No, she would not. Pregnancy and birth change things—forever. In the midst of these changes, Mary felt a sense of loss, a grieving for how life had been, for the "self" she was before. Her firm breasts would now sag under

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Joan with daughters Amity and Charity in 1985

the weight of breastfeeding. Her full belly would empty. Maybe she would have to give up her own life for this child. And as the child grew, she would have to let go of him and lose him. "And a sword shall pierce your own heart also. . . ."

How strange, that *when we consider pregnancy it brings us in touch not only with life but also with death!* It compels us to look hard at both ends of life, to come to grips with how narrow the margin between the first breath and the last, between the darkness and the light.

Last December, I held my father's hand as he was laboring to die. I realized that I had lived part of this experience before. As he labored to let go of earthly life, I remembered how I, too, had once labored to give birth to new life. I, too, had experienced a "rebirth" in giving birth to each of my daughters.

Just as the pain of contractions gave way to the joy of the first cry of new life, the pain of what it means to lose one's life gives way to the joy of gaining it in Christ!

In the experience of childbirth, I have been given the privilege of tasting the *mystery*

of the divine. In those moments I thanked God for making me a woman. God has given me a chance to grow, to let go of and make peace with my past, to live fully in the present, and to become more of who I am meant to be as a person.

During this Holy Season, may you, like Mary, give birth to the Christ within you, to reach out and be part of the miracle and the mystery of Christmas. As you celebrate the Nativity and welcome the Child into your hearts and lives, so welcome every child into your Christian community. Be there for new parents. Help with laundry, shopping, or providing childcare. Help new parents sort out all their "normal crazy" thoughts and feelings associated with the crisis of childbirth as you listen to them. Offer them the hope of growing and developing as people and parents.

A little Child led us to know ourselves and to be our best selves. That message is repeated powerfully with each new child on earth. Christmas invites us to thank our children for the life which God has so miraculously given us through them. Christmas invites us to thank the Holy Child, whose birth and growth and life in love enables parents and children to become holy families.

*Christ, Light of Light, is born to us.
He is born in us, and therefore,
We also are born today!*

—Thomas Merton

P.S. Thank you, Charity and Amity, for making me a Mom!

Together with her husband, Dr. Kenneth C. Haugk, **Joan Marie Reimler Haugk** was co-founder of the Stephen Ministries organization based in St. Louis, Missouri. Since



1975, the not-for-profit Christian training organization has helped more than 14,000 congregations representing over 190 denominations worldwide organize and equip laypeople to provide one-to-one Christian care to people experiencing a crisis.

Joan was born on October 30, 1947, and entered into eternal glory on January 19, 2002, after a three-and-a-half-year battle with ovarian cancer.