

Introduction

FEAR IN MOTHERING

In the midst of an evening storm last summer, a jolt of jagged lightning cut through the darkness, cutting off our electricity. So the kids and I gathered together in my bedroom and read by candlelight. They cuddled close and listened to books filled with beautiful imagery. We weren't doing anything grand, but no one was fighting, and everyone seemed content. It felt like we were exactly where we were supposed to be—together and safe from the storm churning outside.

Oftentimes, the storm isn't outside of our home; it's right in the middle of it, and no one is safe from the whirlwind of mess, heightened emotions, and chaos that seems to follow us everywhere we go.

Just recently, we were rushing out the door, and my kids were dawdling, fighting, singing loudly, leaving a trail of detritus, telling me exceedingly long stories, and getting angry because I wasn't making constant eye contact with them. Basically, they were driving me absolutely nuts.

My inner White Rabbit was unleashed, and I was repeatedly hollering, "We're late! We're late! We're late!"

Our tardiness didn't seem to bother the kids at all; they continued to move in slow motion except when they were lashing out at a sibling. Then their arms were windmills of thrashing motion.

But I was not ready to surrender. I dug in my heels more deeply and barked my orders more loudly. Like a raging tsunami—what my oldest and I joke is my alter ego, the *tsu-mommy*—I stormed through the house.

This is exactly the kind of mom I don't want my children to remember. I want them to just think of my face, calm and serene in the candlelight, reading books while I shielded them from the summer storm—instead of allowing us to become part of one.

After yet another failed search-and-rescue mission for MIA shoes, I corralled the kids into my car. During the entire ride, I lectured, nagged, and droned on and on, but none of this made me feel any better. Nor did any of my didactic diatribes seem to sink in with my children. I am disappointed to announce that at the time of this book's publication, they continue to misplace shoes, so much so that I'm starting to suspect our home is the Bermuda Triangle for footwear. In all likelihood, all my children probably heard in my chiding was "Wah-wah-wah," as if I were an adult in a *Peanuts* show.

When I dropped the kids off at school, there was a flurry of rushed "good-byes" and "I love yous." As soon as the van doors slid shut, I was left alone with my fears and insecurities, and a tangle of questions dashed across my mind: *Why am I not a more patient mother? A more joyful mother? Why don't my children ever seem to respond to empathetic limits—or my drill sergeant orders? Why do I have to remind my children millions of times to put their shoes back in the proper place or to do this or that yet they still keep managing to forget? Why do I so frequently feel like an epic failure when it comes to being a mom? Why do these lovely children of mine sometimes drive me absolutely crazy? What is wrong with me?*

I know I'm not the only mother who asks questions like these. While most moms have a decent archive of happy moments with

their children as well as occasions when they feel like they got it right as mothers, the fear of failure weighs heavily on most of our mothering shoulders.

Motherhood is tough, and guilt that we're not doing this mothering gig properly seems to be woven into our DNA. Yet so many of us are afraid to reveal our fears, our struggles, or the fact that as much as we love our children, they do sometimes feel like a burden. Because if we acknowledge those awful truths—that we sometimes feel overwhelmed or discontented, that mothering isn't always a source of bliss or fulfillment—then what does that say about us as mothers and, even more so, as Christians?



When I was a few weeks from submitting this very manuscript, I discovered I was pregnant with my fifth child. For the first time in my mothering journey, seeing those two little lines appear did not evoke feelings of excitement or happiness. Instead, I was scared, frustrated, and sad. What's more, because I felt all of those less-than-desirable emotions when I thought that I *should* be feeling blessed and excited, I experienced powerful waves of guilt. *If I believed children were gifts from God, how could I be feeling so resentful?* Instead of reflecting upon how this baby would enrich my life and my family, all I could focus on was how a new child would complicate an already overwhelming, over-leveraged, and overextended life. I also selfishly kept thinking about how I'd *finally* started having a little more alone time that didn't require me setting an alarm clock for 4:30 a.m.

All of these feelings were normal for a mom who, only a few months prior, had accepted the size of her family; decided to remove all traces of all things "baby" and gave *everything* (everything!) away; and was really starting to appreciate this new season of her life and not having any bums to wipe on the hour. God has a hilarious sense of humor. Just *hilarious*.

I don't often admit or say aloud the bleak kinds of thoughts I had after I discovered I was pregnant as well as the anxious questions I ask myself whenever I have a bad day.

In Christian circles—where we're fervently fighting against a culture that too often devalues children and motherhood—it can be scary and feel unsettling to speak the truth and share any of our more negative feelings and experiences as parents.

But when we sugarcoat motherhood and fail to be authentic mothers, we actually do our families a disservice. By hiding behind “everything is wonderful” or, at the very least, “I'm fine” masks, we dismiss the cost of motherhood. And there *is* a cost. If motherhood is a path to sanctity, then we ought to expect some bumps along the road. As Mother Angelica said, “Holiness is not for wimps and the cross is not negotiable, sweetheart, it's a requirement.”¹

As Christians, we have to be careful to not simply bask in the glory of Jesus' birth and Resurrection while completely glossing over or ignoring the Passion. We can't appreciate the sacrifice of the Cross or the need for a Savior if we don't recognize and regard Jesus' suffering and death and our own brokenness.

This was depicted poignantly on the cover of a 2013 issue of *Time* magazine that featured a picture of a beautiful couple with toned bodies and blissful smiles sunbathing under the headline “The Childfree Life.” As someone who works in media, I immediately recognized the cover had its own sensationalist agenda. Honestly, the toothy couple reminded me more of advertising than journalism. Showing a good-looking, childless couple was a savvy marketing campaign that delivered a message like this: *Forgo pregnancy, adoption, or any other way of acquiring soul-sucking money pits, also known as children, and you, too, can travel the world, find the ultimate kind of happiness, and look like a movie star.*

The cover definitely suggested that choosing not to have children can be equated with greater happiness or, at the very least, with more freedom to pursue things that might make you happy. On the flip side, I believe the Christian parenting camp

has been guilty of using its own alluring marketing: *Children are always blessings, not burdens! You don't know what real happiness is until you bring a child into the world. They're hard work, but they're worth it. They give far more than they take! Having children is the "be all and end all" to living a happy, fulfilling life!*

We also have the tendency to see those who don't have children—or perhaps openly admit how hard it is to parent them—as more selfish. Although the primacy of self may be partly to blame for people choosing the childless life, it could be argued that it's sometimes to blame for choosing to have kids, too. We want the good without the bad. We want the cuddles and kisses without the poop, tantrums, or defiant toddlers and tweens. We want the teenagers sans the hormones. We want to kiss a boo-boo and immediately see all the pain washed away. We don't want to hurt or see our kids hurt. We certainly don't want to hurt our own kids. We invest in our children because that's what parents do but also because we expect a return for our investment. We want to see the fruit of our work ripen well and become something beautiful. We want to bring virtuous and content people into the world; we don't want to create slaves to addiction or depression or worldly desires as sons or daughters. But becoming a parent forces us to face *and* admit our fears. It's not about us or our desires. It's not even about our happiness. Motherhood, like nothing else in my life, has forced me to relinquish control, to trust, and to look beyond myself as well as my own limitations.

We all have fears and struggles as moms, and it's time we start sharing them. In doing so, we're able to free ourselves from some of the worry that we're the *only* ones who have "difficult" children who push our buttons and yes, at times annoy us. When we admit that being a mom is the hardest job we will ever love, we're giving others permission to be authentic as well and to share their own private doubts about their maternal competency. When we share in the mess of maternity and humanity, we're telling the secular world that might question the value of children and motherhood that it's a difficult thing but the fact that we're

acknowledging the struggle yet still waking up each day shows that it's worth it.

As author and speaker Brené Brown writes, "The dark does not destroy the light; it defines it. It's our *fear of the dark* that casts our joy into the shadows."²

Are you ready to embrace the darkness—the not-so-nice aspects of motherhood—in order to better appreciate the light? Are you ready to admit that yes, you sometimes yell at your children but you love them so very much and want to try harder not to? Do you want to be a more joyful mother but find yourself feeling like an empty shell of a person with a slapped-on smiley face? Are you prepared to unload the guilt that burdens you, not by trying to do *more* as a mother but simply by trusting in God, his providence, and his love for you and your family?

Then, dear moms, keep calm and read on.

Something that is beautiful about the Church is that it holds the mother in high esteem. But the sublimity of motherhood can be a double-edged sword. It's ingrained in us to make mothering a huge part of our lives, to do it well, to give our best. Far too often, women equate giving mothering our best with being perfect.

In the pages that follow, I'll take a look at some of the nagging "earworms" that trip us up and guilt us into doing and saying things that force us into someone else's idea of perfection rather than allowing us to become the people God intended us to be all along. You'll also find group discussion questions at the end of the book that will help you reflect on and share your mothering journey with close friends or a mother's group at your parish. It's my prayer that this book might help all mothers feel worthy of their calling and also reveal how speaking the truth can liberate us from the myriad fears that may prevent us from being the good parents we so desperately long to be. Our fears prevent us from becoming the truest versions of ourselves. Likewise, our fears are inextricably linked to a lack of trust in our God.

Authentic motherhood cannot be rooted in fear; it must come from a place of love and trust.

Few of life's pursuits can cause more of a barrage of self-doubt, guilt, and exhaustion than mothering. But it's my hope that by opening up about my own struggles as a mother and what has helped me to deal with them, I'll help to free other moms to change the ways they see their own mothering, to be willing to grow imperfectly, and to lessen mom guilt: the guilt that we're not the moms we should be; the guilt that we're the only moms who daydream about running away from it all; the guilt that we could and should do more and be more. In place of that heap of guilt, I want to assure you that through God's grace, love, and endless stream of mercy, each of us is exactly the mom our children need us to be.

CHAPTER 1

Queen Mommy

MOTHERHOOD IS NOT THE MOST
IMPORTANT JOB A WOMAN HAS



EVIL EARWORM

Being a mother is the *most important thing* a Catholic woman can do.

UNVARNISHED TRUTH

Motherhood is actually not your highest calling. Being a daughter of God is.



When some people find out how many children I have, they're quick to canonize me Saint Mommy. "You must be so patient," I've heard on more than one occasion. Amazingly, these same commentators seem impervious to the sideways glances and eye rolls from my children who have just witnessed someone use the words "patient" and "mom" in the same sentence when referring to their own mother. I'm a lot of things: fun, energetic, creative, passionate, witty, and athletic, but patience is not my best virtue. I've had to really work hard at cultivating patience as a mom, and I wouldn't even call myself one of those women who was, by nature, going to organically evolve into a mother.

On the contrary, my own call to motherhood came more abruptly than slowly and naturally. As a teenager and young woman, I didn't have a strong desire to be a mother—at least not for a long time. I had places to go and things to do! What's more, I wasn't a particularly nurturing child. I bossed my younger brother around, prayed for the rapture when I was relegated to the kids' table at family gatherings and put in charge of overseeing the little ones, and decided to trade in my babysitting jobs for jean folder extraordinaire at the GAP as soon as I snagged my driver's license. Babies and kids were cute enough, and I imagined that probably one day—way, way, way in the future—I'd be ready to settle down and get married and have a family, but first things first!

After being accepted into law school, I took a clerk job at a posh law firm in the city. One morning as I was commuting to work, I experienced what can only be described as a true calling. I was sitting on the subway reading St. Teresa of Calcutta's *A Simple Path*; the now-saint was talking about how charity must begin at home, and an avalanche of strong feelings crashed through me. As I sifted through the emotional sediment, I realized—*what in the world?*—I really, really wanted to be a wife and a mother someday. *Ah-ha! This is what I'm supposed to do with my life.*

Sharing this moment feels a little like seeing a Charlton Heston-like figure appear, surrounded by flocks of chubby cherubs.

Yet at that instant and since then, I've never stopped believing it was a very real spiritual happening when something outside of my own personal whims was at work.

This revelation was both exciting and terrifying—and also odd to me, since I was single at the time and had actually sworn off suitors for more than a year after a particularly bad breakup. But God doesn't call the equipped. He equips the called, and not shortly thereafter, God equipped me with a handsome, nice young man I had known and dated briefly in high school. Said man is now my husband. When we reunited, he was preparing for his own rigorous professional training, so I dropped out of law school, started writing for a living, got married, and promptly began pining for babies.

At the time, I was also delving further into my faith, exploring documents like St. John Paul II's *Letter to Women*. The letter addresses and lauds women from all walks of life, but I zeroed in on what he wrote to women who are physical mothers: "You have sheltered human beings within yourselves in a unique experience of joy and travail. This experience makes you become God's own smile upon the newborn child, the one who guides your child's first steps, who helps it to grow, and who is the anchor as the child makes its way along the journey of life."¹ As a mother, I considered, I would be God's own smile and anchor to my children. This call to motherhood was sublime and a sure path to holiness.

All of this is true, of course, but as I've grown into mothering shoes, I've learned that there's a danger in seeing our roles as mothers as our absolute highest calling.

The more I personally saw my role as a mother as my only and loftiest calling, the more pressure I felt to do everything right. At the same time, other parts of my life were too easily neglected. In my early years of mothering, I wrote about being a mom, read mom blogs and parenting books, joined mom groups, said prayers geared toward mothers, and meticulously tracked my cycle with one thought on my mind—*babies, babies, and more babies!*

Meanwhile, I gave the sometimes-sparse emotional leftovers to the other important relationships in my life—including my personal relationship with God. In my quest to be a godly mother, I had completely isolated myself from God, relegating all energy to my parenting.

THE CORONATION OF MOTHER

I've never been what you'd call a smother mother. My toddlers probably ate more dirt than vegetables. Once I lost three out of four kids at a soccer game. The one I hadn't lost was the one playing on the field. I found the other three dangling precariously from the top of a tree. I made sure they safely returned to the ground, and then I returned to the bleachers to watch the soccer game only to lose the three again. But that doesn't mean I'm not an obsessive mother. Crown me Queen Mommy because *this is the most important job in the world; I will pour everything into it, and I will not screw it up!* I don't worry about scrapes and bruises so much, but there are nights I lie awake terrified that I've ruined my children, that I haven't done enough for them or that I've done too much for them. There have been times when someone has asked me to share my talents for a good purpose, and I've quickly said no because I am a mother—the CEO of Souls Incorporated—and my children need me, all of me, all of the time, thank you very much.

There have also been periods when even my prayer life has suffered. *I don't have time to pray because this mothering assignment and managing a household is all-consuming.* Ironically, however, I always seem to find time to mindlessly peruse Instagram while stirring soup for dinner.

I personally have not had issues with not making my marriage a priority, partly because baby-making includes him, but I know of other mothers who reserve their love and intimacy for their children, leaving their spouses feeling lonely and neglected.

The truth is, I'm not Queen Mommy. I'm not queen anything actually, but I *am* a beloved daughter of God. None of us is deserving of a coronation. Let's leave that to our Blessed Mother. When mothering and our children—like anything else of this world—become our ultimate source of fulfillment, happiness, and identity, they can become a form of idolatry. In the midst of our noble desire to be selfless, good parents, it's easy for Christian mothers to forget a simple but profound truth: the highest calling placed upon our lives is to know and love God with all that we have and all that we are.

I'm grateful the Church elevates motherhood to a beautiful calling, that great leaders of the Church like the late Cardinal József Mindszenty described mothers as the most important people on earth, who build “something more magnificent than any cathedral—a dwelling for an immortal soul, the tiny perfection of her baby's body,”² but it's frighteningly easy for a “good, Christian” mother to love and serve her children too exclusively as well as to bury her God-given talents from the rest of the world instead of sharing them and allowing them to bear fruit. It also places a lot of pressure on women who suffer from miscarriages or infertility to think that the ultimate path to holiness is *only* fully achieved through physical motherhood.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* says, “The virtue of temperance disposes us to *avoid every kind of excess*” (CCC, 2290). It is possible to be excessive in our mothering and to idolize the role of mother. But God can help us keep perspective and balance.

MOTHERS NEVER STOP BEING DAUGHTERS OF GOD

In Genesis, a desperate Rachel cries out, “Give me children or I shall die!” (Gn 30:1). Her desire to be a mother is so strong she would rather die than imagine a childless life. Some women know her supplications well. There are those who struggle with