

International Workshop to be held at the University of Verona (Italy), 17-18 February 2022 (*tbc*), organized by Dr. Giulia Pedrucci

Mothers in the Time of the Church Fathers: Maternal Thought and Maternal Practice between Normative Representations and Individual Transgressions

This workshop builds on a long-lasting research project that aims at investigating how and to what extent religion, through the words of mainly male authorities, has dictated the female perception of the role of mother and has affected the daily life of mothers. The epistemological framework offered by matricentric feminism (Andrea O'Reilly 2016) rejects any essentialism and does not conflate the categories of “woman” and “mother.” Not all women become mothers and people who are not women can assume maternal roles. As Sarah Ruddick (1989) suggests, “mother” is better understood as a verb (*to mother*) than as a feminine substantive. A mother is anyone who engages in maternal practice, or motherwork, and makes this a central part of their life. Therefore, “to mother” is a gender-inclusive concept. To some extent, in a similar way, in the ancient Rome *pater* was the person who wielded the *patria potestas*.

Another pivotal key tenet of the maternal theory is the distinction made by Susan Starr Sered (1994) between “womAn as symbol” (e.g., images of goddesses and normative stereotypes created by male religious authorities) and “womEn as agents” (real practice, historical mothers). This can be linked to the distinction made by Adrienne Rich (1976) between “motherhood as an institution” and “motherhood as experience” (women’s experience of and relation to her own reproductive capacities) are particularly relevant here. In fact, evidence suggests a widespread gap between normative representation and actual practice.

Doubtless, norms elaborated and imposed by the Church Fathers have been a fundamental turning point in the perception of the maternal role in the so-called Western societies.

This workshop is meant to explore case studies in which:

- “motherhood as an institution” imposed by the Church Fathers as well as changes and continuity with previous norms are investigated;
- mothers’ response to religious norms imposed by the Church Fathers can be singled out. In particular, case studies that show to which extent mothers felt free to transgress norms without blaming themselves for not being “good” mothers and obedient member of their religious community, whether Christian or otherwise, in Late Antiquity (“motherhood as an experience”);
- the legacy derived from the Church Fathers around and beyond the Mediterranean.

Proposals about case studies responding to the theoretical framework of motherhood studies outlined above are welcome.

Please, send your proposals to giulia.pedrucci@univr.it until 15 July 2021.