

COURIER-JOURNAL

The woman of the Magnificat

By Katharine Bird
NC News Service

Contemporary women can find in Mary a fitting model for their 20th-century lives, said Bishop Matthew Clark of Rochester, N.Y., in an April 1982 pastoral letter on women.

Many Catholic feminists today are turning to Mary in their search for a "strong, caring model, a woman faithful to herself and to the church," noted Sister of Mercy Patricia Smith.

But Mary can't be restricted to women alone, Sister Smith said in an interview. Mary is a "model for all faithful men and women." Sister Smith teaches theology at St. Mary's Seminary and University in Baltimore, Md.

In his pastoral letter, Bishop Clark said that when Mary's "place in the life and continued ministry of the church is recognized and understood, the place of all women in the church is assured." Women, he said, are "integral co-workers, as necessary to the incarnation of Christ in our world as Mary was to the first incarnation."

Both Bishop Clark and Sister Smith regarded Mary as a woman of action and strength. "There is nothing vapid or sentimental about her," said the bishop. "She is a woman with her feet planted

firmly on the earth."

Mary shows us "what it is to be Christian: to believe in God — to stand firm — to serve others. She heard the word of God and acted on it," said Sister Smith.

In response to student requests, Sister Smith developed a popular course on Mary.

Often the Mercy Sister finds that people's "understanding of Mary has a lot to do with their understanding of God." Those who view God as one who calls human beings to cooperate with him in his work in the world are likely to think of Mary in this light too. They look at the Annunciation, for instance, and see a woman cooperating with God in that work, Sister Smith said.

She added that Mary keeps us "rooted in history." Because Mary is a woman who bore a son, she keeps us "from believing in a totally spiritualized Christ."

The Scriptures present Mary as "a woman of her time, the wife of a poor working man, the mother of a wandering rabbi," Sister Smith said.

Mary aligns herself most clearly with the poor and the oppressed in her song, "The Magnificat," Sister Smith said in an article she wrote for the November-December 1983 issue of the

magazine, *Today's Parish*.

"Mary could hear the cry of the poor and proclaim it so eloquently because she was one of them," Sister Smith wrote. The Magnificat, she suggested, is Mary's public acknowledgement of the call to work for justice.

For Mary, doing justice meant "treating all with dignity and respect, because all were made in the image of God," she added.

"It has ever been the task of the church to let the questions of the day challenge and deepen her understanding," Bishop Clark pointed out in his pastoral letter. In today's world, a proper understanding of Mary's role and that of women might mean taking a fresh look at the way women participate in the church, he suggested.

He called for an ongoing dialogue in his diocese and in the church to find creative ways for women to participate more fully in the life of the church.

"It is this kind of dialogue between believers and their culture...which under the guidance of the Holy Spirit keeps us growing toward the full stature of Christ," he concluded.

(Ms. Bird is associate editor of *Faith Today*)

A double-edged sword

By Father John Castelot
NC News Service

Imitate Mary. Is that realistic advice?

Consider these points: A man cannot imitate her motherhood; a woman cannot imitate her virginal motherhood. No one can imitate her Immaculate Conception, which was a completely free and extraordinary gift from God.

What then? In his theological portrait of Mary, Luke highlights her role as the first Christian disciple.

She heard the word of God and kept it. That can be imitated.

Mary was chosen to be the mother of God's son because she was the "highly favored daughter" (Luke 1), the object of God's love. It was not because of special merit on her part.

Like all Christians, all Mary could contribute was her free acceptance of God's favor. She did that in spite of the fact that she was "deeply troubled" and did not understand the implications of what was happening to her, or what God had in store for her.

Mary's response in Luke's first

chapter was that of a model disciple: "I am the servant of the Lord. Let it be done to me as you say."

Then, still in Luke's first chapter, there is Mary's moving reaction to God's offer of grace: "My being proclaims the greatness of the Lord...For he has looked upon his servant in her lowliness...God who is mighty has done great things for me, holy is his name."

In the episode of the Presentation, an aged man named Simeon foretells the dramatic destiny of her son. And Simeon gives Mary this cryptic warning: "You yourself will be pierced with a sword" (Luke 2).

The nature of that sword — one involving choice and decision — becomes clear in the following story about finding Jesus in the temple, when he was thought lost. Mary chides Jesus for subjecting her and Joseph to such anguish. Jesus replies: "Why did you search for me? Did you not know I had to be in my Father's house?" (Luke 2).

Gentle as this rejoinder from Jesus may have been, it expressed clearly the fact that he had his

own work to do. His work would mean separation from her — a prospect to twist any mother's heart. What made the sword even sharper was the fact that Mary did not understand, as Luke goes on to say: "They did not grasp what he said to them."

Nevertheless, the account continues, Mary kept trying to understand: "His mother meanwhile kept all these things in memory." This is the model disciple, one who gratefully accepts God's offer — the person who listens to God's word, trusts it, follows it.

Once again in his Gospel, Luke reminds readers that here is where Mary's true personal greatness lies. We read of a woman in a crowd who cried out to Jesus, saying "Blest is the womb that bore you and the breasts that nursed you!" Rather, Jesus responds, "blest are they who hear the word of God and keep it" (Luke 11).

Mary is a model for disciples. She heard the word of God and kept it.

(Father Castelot teaches at St. John's Seminary, Plymouth, Mich.)