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New focus directs Marian devotions

By Lee Strong
Staff writer

Approximately 2,000 years ago, a young, unmarried Jewish girl was called upon to make a difficult decision.

The girl was asked to become pregnant, even though she was not married and could, according to the laws of the time, face death.

She did not hesitate. "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord," she proclaimed. "May it be done to me according to your word."

In uttering those words, Mary inaugurated a new covenant, Pope John Paul II noted in his 1987 encyclical, *Redemptoris Mater*.

By choosing to follow the will of God, to play her part in the Incarnation, to watch Jesus grow and begin his mission, to suffer a "sword" piercing her own heart, and to stand at the foot of the cross while her only son died, Mary became a model for the church and its people, the pope observed.

"Her exceptional pilgrimage of faith represents a constant point of reference for the church, for individuals and for communities, for peoples and nations, and in a sense for all humanity," John Paul II declared. "It is indeed difficult to encompass and measure its range."

Bishop Matthew H. Clark, in his 1982 pastoral letter, "American Catholic Women: Persistent Questions, Faithful Witness," noted, "The pre-eminent model for men and women from the beginning of Christianity, most especially in the Catholic Church, is Mary, mother of Jesus. It is no coincidence that the fathers of Vatican Council II included a chapter on Mary in the Constitution on the Church, for she is both the traditional symbol of the church and the best model of true discipleship."

"She shows us what a disciple is to be," remarked Father William Gaffney, CSSR, rector of Notre Dame Retreat Center. "Look at how she responded. She is the first and foremost disciple."

In the 2,000 years since she assented to becoming the mother of Jesus Christ, Mary has become not only a model for discipleship, but also an object of veneration and devotion.

Over those centuries, the "Hail Mary" has become second only to the "Our Father" as a Catholic prayer. Artists have been inspired to produce countless statues and portraits of Mary.

Today, the rosary is recited on a daily basis by thousands, perhaps millions of individuals. Thousands of pilgrims travel each year to such Marian shrines as Lourdes and Fatima, and to the site of reported but unconfirmed apparitions of Mary at Medjugorje.

In the Rochester diocese, the Knights of Columbus schedule two Marian days of prayer each year, drawing approximately 500 people to each. And during the month of May, parishes and schools throughout the diocese take part in such traditional devotions as living rosaries and May crownings.

Devotion to Mary continues strong in the church, even in an age when other traditional devotions are falling by the wayside. Still, for a time following the Second Vatican Council, such devotions did seem to decline.

"A lot of things the church used to have

to show devotion to Mary have disappeared (in many parishes)," observed Mary Kelly, a member of the Blue Army of Rochester, a group dedicated to commemorating events at Fatima.

Father Alexander Bradshaw, pastor of Holy Ghost Parish, Rochester, acknowledged that some traditional practices did diminish in the days following Vatican II. He speculated that those traditions gave way as the church began developing a new sense of itself. Many Catholics saw Marian devotion as part of the "old" church.

But, with the passage of time since the council, the church has recognized a new dimension to Mary. "We have discovered a different dimension ... which has its links to the earlier tradition, but something that is more in tune with where we are in terms of devotion now," Father Bradshaw said.

"It's been like the waves of the advancing ocean," noted Father Peter Lappin, SDB, author of the book, *First Lady of the World*. "(Devotion) ebbs and flows."

Father Lappin, a staff member at the Marian Shrine at West Haverstraw, N.Y., pointed out that before Vatican II, devotions had begun to take inappropriate turns. He recalled, for example, hearing one preacher essentially claim that Mary was like the fourth person of the Blessed Trinity.

The council fathers, however, "cleared away a lot of the dross, the sentimental," he said. Instead, the devotions were re-founded on doctrine. "The council put (devotion to Mary) inside the life of the church," he said. "Devotion to the Blessed Mother is far deeper grounded in the dogma of the church. It's far leaner and cleaner."

Following up on the pronouncements of Vatican II concerning Mary, Pope John Paul II, who has dedicated his pontificate to Mary and who has a deep devotion to the Blessed Mother, wrote his encyclical about her. In it, he revealed a much more human side of her than the view some traditional devotions had fostered, noted Ruth Page, pastoral assistant at St. Joseph Parish, Livonia.

According to Page, who has studied the encyclical and delivered a talk about it in her parish, the pope pointed out the virtues and strengths of Mary, and raised her as a model for Christians. "Every truth about Mary is a truth about us," she observed.

"I think we're quick to discount that we are made in the image and likeness of God," Page continued. But as God did in Mary, "He abides in us. We (like Mary) are to be bearers of Christ in the world. We are the body of Christ. We're more able to see it in Mary, but in seeing it in her, we are able to see the truth that is ourselves."

Sister Margie Mayk, rc, for one, said that the new focus reintroduced her to Mary as a real person.

"She's a woman of faith," noted Sister Mayk, retreat coordinator at Rochester's Cenacle Center for Spiritual Renewal, which will be celebrating the Feast of Our Lady of the Cenacle on May 26.

In Luke's Gospel story about the Annunciation, Sister Mayk noted, "(Mary) was afraid. She was questioning. She was uncertain. Yet she was able to say, 'Yes,' and to believe."

"That says a lot to us today," she con-

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