

Mail spurs reflections on warm reunions

By Bishop Matthew H. Clark

I have made references from time to time in this column to the mail I receive. Usually these remarks have been passing references to letters that have been angry or critical. While it is true that I receive a fair measure of correspondence that is critical in nature, most of my mail is not that way. Most letters are about routine business matters, personal concerns or pastoral questions.

At this time of year, of course, the volume of mail increases. Christmas cards are arriving at home and at the office. It's fun to receive the cards because they so often reunite me spiritually with the people who sent them. The receipt of them brings back memories of people and events I find life giving.

Last night was a good example. When I arrived home after the activities of the evening I changed into pajamas, bathrobe and slippers, turned on the Raiders-Lions football game and began to go through the day's mail.

Father Jim McNamara, the priest who

organized the wonderful retreat in Assisi in October, kindly sent me a letter he had sent to all retreatants inviting them to a reunion in early January. They'll have an hour of prayer together, enjoy a lasagna supper and share an evening of conversation remembering that rich retreat experience.

It was so good last night to remember the retreat. It wasn't a case of merely recalling a past event. It was more like re-experiencing an occasion for ministry that was very important to me and still renews me. The invitation to the reunion convened a reunion in my own heart.

Another note I received came from a priest in another part of our country. I have known him for a long time now and always enjoy the thoughtful note he pens on his Christmas card each year.

This year's message was different from those of other years. He mentioned that the year has held several challenges, but that he had managed with God's help to meet them fairly well.

He did say that he wanted to share one experience with me that had been very im-

portant for him this year. The experience was that he finally told his parents that he is gay. It was not difficult to read between the lines and to know that he found that an enormously difficult thing to do. But what was clear and bold on the page was his joy at the loving way in which his parents received the news. "My parents told me they have always loved me and that they always will," he wrote.

You might guess that this note gave rise to some reflection. First, I was grateful to my friend's parents for their loving and healing reception of him. Clearly, it meant the whole world to my friend. He did not elaborate on the response. He just wrote that his parents now know just who he is and they love him.

Secondly, I am grateful for the fact that he trusted me with this confidence. I must and will thank him for that because I think it indicates that he places a high level of trust in me, and that is always a gift.

I have gone on quite a bit and have touched on only two pieces of mail I opened yesterday. There were many others that



I would like to share with you. Perhaps at another time I will

The two pieces I have mentioned I would have enjoyed at any time, but they mean a great deal to me in this Advent season. That is because they speak of different aspects of the human experience, of how we are called to accept and to love one another just as God always accepts and loves us, of how much we need the support of our sisters and brothers.

Peace to all.

Mary's faith should be the focus of Christians during every season

By Mary Lu Coffey
Diocesan Liturgical Commission

At first it may seem odd to focus on Mary in December rather than in May or October. Yet what better an Advent figure than she whose profound surrender to the will of God brought forth the savior of all humankind?

A real flesh and blood, struggling and growing woman of faith lies beneath the coldness of dogma and the fixed smile of a plaster statue. And she has even more to



say to people moving into the 21st century than she did to those of the first century.

As we search the Scriptures for information about Mary, we find precious little in the way of "hard facts" and there are many things we wish we knew about her.

Yet the first two chapters of the Gospels of Matthew and Luke — the infancy nar-

ratives — are a masterpiece and can be the basis of very reflective prayer during this Advent-Christmas season. Mary was a young Jewish woman of great faith whose belief led her to wait in quiet expectation of the promised Messiah. Her openness allowed her to hear the word of God even though it came in a way she surely did not expect. Mary's surrender received that word in her womb in spite of the many questions left unanswered about how it would happen, where and how she would care for this child of wonder.

Two feasts of Mary are celebrated during Advent, each giving a different focus on her and adding to our understanding of her place in history.

The first feast is the Immaculate Conception, which is celebrated on Dec. 8. We affirm in this feast that she was filled with God's grace from the moment of her conception. Although defined as a dogma only in 1854, the feast is a very ancient celebration. Under the title of Immaculate Conception, Mary is patroness of the United States.

The second feast honoring Mary — celebrated a few days later on Dec. 12 — is that of Our Lady of Guadalupe. Most of us probably know the facts of Mary's appearance to a poor Mexican Indian, Juan Diego, in 1531 at Tepeyac, a hill outside

Mexico City. Actually Juan was a *mestizo*, one of a mixed breed from the Spanish and Indian cultures who was often brutalized and left without hope. Yet he formed a new people.

Mary left Juan with an image of herself inside his cloak — a pregnant *mestizo* shining like the moon and sun together. Many find it reminiscent of the image described in the book of Revelation: "... a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars" (Revelation 12:1).

The real miracle, according to Virgilio Elizondo in his book *Galilean Journey*, is not the apparition to Juan but its effect on the defeated Indians. Those who had been robbed of their lands, their way of life and even their gods were given new life through Mary's voice. Under the image of Our Lady of Guadalupe, Mary is patroness of the Americas.

And so I return to why we are speaking of Mary in December. Meister Eckhart challenged his 13th-century parish with these words: "What good is it if Mary gave birth to the Son of God fourteen hundred years ago and I do not give birth to the Son of God in my time and culture?"

This should be our question, too. If we want to birth Christ, we have only to look to Mary as our model.

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