

AS A CHILD

Mary in the nativity is most popular image

DAYTON, Ohio (CNS) — When it comes to favorite images of Mary, mother of Jesus, there are no age or gender gaps.

A survey by researchers at the University of Dayton found that the nativity scene is — hands down — the most popular portrayal from the life of the blessed Virgin Mary. The majority of respondents — of both sexes and ranging in age from 13 to 79 years old — chose scenes depicting the birth of Christ as their favorite representations of Mary.

"If we look at the best-known and most popular events in the year, one that sticks out like a sore thumb is Christmas," said Marianist Father Johann Roten, director of the International Marian Research Institute and the study's co-author. Even those unfamiliar with the histories of Jesus or Mary and related religious teachings recognize the nativity, he said. "Everyone is confronted with Christmas."

The ubiquity of nativity scenes partially explains their overwhelming popularity, he said. But people also recognize the event as being fundamental to Christianity.

"This is the core statement you make about Christianity," he said. "When you talk about Christianity, you say first of all it's a religion of incarnation, incarnation being that God became human reality."

Besides looking at 12 artworks based on events from Mary's life and selecting their favorite image, respondents were asked to react to the thematic impact of 12 Mary images and seven styles or periods of art depicting Mary. Roten and University of Dayton psychology professor Donald Polzella analyzed the responses by age group and sex, breaking ages into categories of teens, young adults (those up to 24 years old), and adults (those 24 to 79 years old). The 210 participants were predominantly Catholic.

One schism appeared in the theme section, with most adults preferring the suffering Mary in the Pieta — a representa-



tion of the Blessed Mother grieving over the body of Jesus after the Crucifixion — and with most teens selecting protective and comforting Our Lady of the Mantle.

"Adults are more likely, because they are adults, to empathize with Mary holding Jesus, mourning over the lost child," Polzella said of preference for the Pieta.

Roten noted that most adults have experienced loss and suffering.

Teens are less likely to relate to the mother-to-child bond and the emotions evoked in that scene. For young people, the strong, protective mother image in Our Lady of the Mantle is emotionally more attractive, Roten said.

Teenagers and young adults expressed about an equal liking for the Renaissance and 19th-century period artworks, while adults clearly showed a preference for the 19th-century images. Other periods or styles included icons, Romanesque, Gothic, Baroque and 20th century.

Teens probably gravitated toward Renaissance renderings of Mary because they are prevalent, familiar and "it's the way they expect Mary to be depicted," Polzella said. Twentieth-century art, which teens deemed their least favorite, lacked that realism, making it less appealing.

"Adults are more sophisticated in taste; they're more apt to see subtleties that escape children," Polzella said, speculating that adults showed a preference for 19th-century images because they are emotionally more complex. Roten added that adults gravitate toward 19th-century images because that period was popular when they were growing up. Adults also gave thumbs down to the 20th-century works, as

well as Romanesque and Baroque representations.

Roten said he conducted the survey to evaluate knowledge of the life of Mary and to study the connections between art and religion. He surveyed students at Catholic high schools; students from Marianist-run University of Dayton, a Catholic university; and adult students at the International Marian Research Institute on the Dayton campus and adults in Cincinnati.

Results show that while respondents — especially teens and young adults — have a positive impression of Mary, they are uninformed. He speculated that a shift in the late 1970s away from religious instructions based on definitions, knowledge and concepts found in the catechism may account for the change, adding that art may provide a vehicle for re-educating the public about the fundamentals of religion.

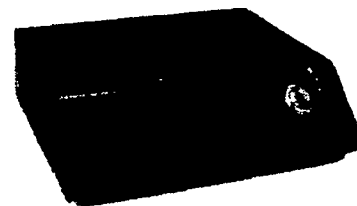
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