

CONTINUED...

Mary

Continued from page 1

Mary Month of May

For centuries, as the earth gives birth to another spring in May, the month has been associated with Mary. The girls who attend Mercy High honor her through the ceremonial crowning of a statue of her that stands in a grotto behind the school.

The students chosen to participate in the ceremony, which is preceded by a Mass inside the school, are selected by Mercy's seniors and juniors as well as faculty and staff members. Voters are instructed to select girls believed to possess such qualities of Mary as kindness and a sense of spirituality.

The highest honor goes to the May Queen, who wears a crown of real flowers during the Mass and who places it upon the statue of Mary's head. This year's queen was senior Clare Costigan, 17, a parishioner at Assumption of Our Lady Church in Fairport.

Just after she learned in April she had been voted May Queen, Clare went on a



Clare Ann Costigan, Our Lady of Mercy High School's May Queen, hugs a May Court attendant after the crowning of Mary in the school's grotto May 25.

At the same time as the students saw Mary as a role model for independent women, they also saw her in a more traditional way, according to Lisa Carpenter, 18, a parishioner at St. Louis Church, Pittsford.

"I really look up to her mostly for her humility," Lisa said of Mary. She pointed out that the biblical Mary questioned God's choice of her to be the mother of Jesus.

"That's just amazing to me that she

thought she wasn't good enough," Lisa said.

Seeking Mary

The girls at Mercy are carrying on a centuries-old quest by Catholics to identify who Mary was and what her role means, questions that Mary Ann Obark explores in her 90-minute workshop "Mary in Church Doctrines." Director of religious education at Christ the King Parish, Irondequoit, she most recently taught the course May 22.

Obark says students in her class tend to be mostly parish catechists seeking credit for religious education certification purposes, but some are Catholics simply looking to learn more about Christ's mother.

"Over the life of the church, 'Mary' has become bigger than the historical Mary," she said.

She pointed out that the Gospel writers make little reference to Christ's mother except for Luke, and, to a certain extent, John. And Paul only refers to her as a nameless woman in his letters. Yet, in the history of Christianity, Mary has been seen as everything from a human embodiment of the virtues of pre-Christian pagan goddesses to a motherly figure almost on par with the

Holy Spirit as being a "refuge for sinners" and a "consoler," according to course literature from Obark.

Many current commentators, especially in Latin America, see her as a spokeswoman for the poor and oppressed, she said. Obark noted that such a view is rooted in Mary's canticle found in Luke 1:46-55.

"(The Lord) has thrown down the rulers from their thrones but lifted up the lowly," a pregnant Mary says to her cousin Elizabeth, pregnant herself with John the Baptist. "The hungry he has filled with good things; the rich he has sent away empty."

Obark added that from the church's earliest centuries, church leaders and scholars have debated, discussed and elaborated on such teachings as the Immaculate Conception. This teaching states that Mary was conceived without the stain of original sin and was defined as a church dogma by Pope Pius IX Dec. 8, 1854.

Interestingly, the only time a pope infallibly defined a church dogma *ex cathedra* was in reference to Mary. On Nov. 1, 1950, Pope Pius XII defined the teaching that Mary was assumed bodily into heaven.

Additionally, Obark pointed out that the Second Vatican Council reaffirmed the church's traditional teachings that Mary was a virgin all her life as well as the virgin mother of Jesus. The church also declared her Mother of God at the Council of Ephesus in 431.

Marian doctrine has a place in Bishop Matthew H. Clark's coat of arms, which has two crescent moons symbolizing the Immaculate Conception, which Obark said she teaches in her course. One crescent stands in the center of the Cross of St. Andrew, which was based on the design of the original coat of arms of the Diocese of Rochester, England.

The other crescent signifies the Immaculate Conception, "the pure disciple of God's Work, the Patroness of the United States," of the Diocese of Albany (Bishop Clark's home diocese), of the North American College (in Rome where the bishop was spiritual director) and of the chapel at the former St. Bernard's Seminary, according to *The Official 2000-2001 Directory of the Diocese of Rochester, New York*.

Obark said that one of the most recent doctrinal controversies about Mary arose in the late 1990s when rumors were flying that Pope John Paul II — famed for his Marian devotion — was going to issue some sort of proclamation that Mary was "coredeemptrix." In use since the 15th century, the term does not demean Christ's role as sole redeemer, but refers to the fact that as his mother, Mary gave the redeemer to the world, and is, therefore, a channel or instrument of all graces.

However, by 1996, Vatican officials had made it clear that no such proclamation was forthcoming, according to the Marian Library/International Marian Research Institute in Dayton, Ohio. The institute, which is officially tied to the Vatican, reported on its Web site (www.udatyon.edu/mary/questions) that a Mariological congress in Poland, held at the Holy See's request, had advised the Vatican against promulgating any new such doctrine.

Reasons cited for such reluctance included a need to clarify the term "coredeemptrix" in all its meaning, which some observers, including Catholics, have likened to making Mary sound as if she is Christ's equal. Defenders of the term stress that that is a mistranslation of the word, according to Obark, who pointed out that the Latin prefix "co-" in the term means "with" not "equal to" as it would in English.

Another concern cited at the congress was the fear that defining a new and controversial Marian dogma could harm ongoing ecumenical dialogue with non-Catholic Christians. Obark stressed that the church has never taught that Mary was beyond the redemptive work of her son.

"She was in need of redemption like all of us," Obark said.



Oreshya Petryk (left), senior honor attendant, and Clare walk to the grotto to crown Mary.

previously skated trip with her mother, from Holy Thursday through Easter week, to Medjugorje, Bosnia-Herzegovina. Mary has reportedly been appearing to visionaries daily for two decades at Medjugorje.

"It was so peace-filled, and the devotion to Mary there was extraordinary," Clare said.

While there, she bought hundreds of small Marian medals which she had blessed by a priest, and distributed them to Mercy students, faculty, staff and family members during the May Day celebration.

Having grown up in a post-Vatican II era when many observers say Catholic interest in Mary has declined significantly, Clare and her fellow seniors in the May Court nonetheless seemed to have well-formed opinions of Christ's mother. They spoke thoughtfully of a woman with whom they seemed to be able to identify as a young female.

For example, Oreshya Petryk, an 18-year-old member of the Ukrainian Catholic Church of the Epiphany in Rochester, said Mary is a hero to modern women because she brought forth a "new idea" by bearing Christ. Similarly, as women's roles have expanded in the church, Mary can be considered a model for birthing new possibilities for women in the church, the student said.



Helen Katherine Root (right), the crown bearer at Mercy High School's May Day celebration, listens to the celebration's Mass, said by Father Fred Betti, SJ. At left is Lisa Carpenter.