

Devotion to Mary part and parcel of Catholic piety

When I was in the seminary studying to be a Priest, way back in the 1960's, I had a job one summer working in the library at Johns Hopkins University. My job was filing foreign dissertations.

I guess they figured that with my "academic portfolio" indicating that I had studied Latin, Greek, German, English, (and later Hebrew) that I would be eminently qualified to tie bundles of dissertations written in foreign languages, and placing them on shelves. As they say, it wasn't rocket science.

While working there, however, I recall a conversation with a cute Jewish girl who said that she loved to date Catholic boys because they were always so respectful of her.

"I think it has something to do with Catholic devotion to the Blessed Mother", she said. "Catholic boys always seemed to have a more honorable attitude toward girls."

Since we couldn't date in the seminary, I never found out if I was, as they say in legal terms, an 'object of interest'. It's probably just as well!

Devotion to Mary is part and parcel of Catholic piety. May is a special month of devotion to Mary. And the month is more than half over and here I am writing my first column about her. Maybe I'll write two!

While the "apparitions" of Mary - especially Lourdes, Fatima and Guadalupe - get lots of attention, devotion is solidly grounded in Scripture. Mary is "there" at important moments in the life of Jesus and the life of the church. Obviously, she is there first at the birth of Jesus.

But biology is not Mary's first claim to fame. When the angel announces to her that she is to be the mother of God, she becomes the first disciple. She becomes the first "to hear the Word of God and keep it." In John's Gospel it is Mary at Cana who 'instigates' the first miracle of Jesus: "They have no wine."

In the same Gospel, John pictures her at the foot of the cross, and Jesus gives her to the Beloved Disciple and gives the disciple to her. "Woman, behold your son. Son, behold your mother."

In the role of disciple, she becomes our model. In her role as mother of the disciple, she becomes a source of inspiration and assistance.

Finally, in Luke's Gospel, at Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit is poured out on the first followers of Christ, Mary is with them. She is there at the birth of Christ and at the birth of Christ's Church. While Mary doesn't appear often in the New Testament, when she does appear, the moments are important moments!

Growing up in Our Lady of Mount Carmel Parish, the influence of Mary obviously was front and center in my life from my earliest days. There was the novena of Our Lady of Perpetual Help every Saturday evening. There was the novena to Our Lady of Mount Carmel every Sunday evening. Every school day at Mount Carmel Elementary began with a hymn to Mary: "We greet thee O Mother, sweet Lady of Carmel, and pray thee to watch o'er our work and our play. In danger defend us. In sorrow befriend us. And guide us all on to the end of our days."

Speaking frankly, growing up, Mary was more comforting to me than God was! I heard many a sermon and lesson on sin and damnation. God seemed awesome and severe. But Mary was always kind and gentle. She would intercede for us, plead for us. She would get us in the back door of heaven even if we couldn't go through the front door.

Today God is portrayed in a kinder, gentler fashion. But Mary still touches my heart. The opening line of the Memorare says it all: "Remember O most holy, Virgin Mary, that never was it known that anyone who fled to thy protection, or sought thy intercession, was ever left unaided."

Never was it known that anyone was not helped by calling upon Mary. The status of women is better. The world is better. In her Magnificat, Mary reminds us that God "lifts up the lowly."

Yes, today I do first call upon the name of the Lord. But I also call upon the name of

Mary. The first disciple, and the mother of disciples, will always hear the prayers of God's children and her children.