

Teacher's aide fosters love of faith at St. Mary, Hagerstown

When 73-year-old Mary Madeline Bender tools around Hagerstown in her six-cylinder, red Pontiac sports car, she's not shy about proclaiming her love for the Blessed Virgin Mary. Bold letters proudly spell out "AVE MARIA" on her vanity license plates.

As a teacher's aide at St. Mary School in Hagerstown for 35 years, Ms. Bender is even more outspoken about fostering devotion to Mary. She educates students about the rosary in religion classes, helps coordinate the

children's Legion of Mary and leads after-school prayer groups.

She does it, she said, because she wants to equip youngsters with a deep-rooted faith that will sustain them as teens and young adults.

"The kids are so innocent," she said. "They're like sponges. We pour as much about the faith as we can into them and they absorb it. They really do hold onto it."

Whenever there is a Marian feast day, Ms. Bender teaches students its history and significance. On a recent feast honoring Mary's birth, she helped coordinate a lunchtime birthday party for the school patroness.

"We put the statue of Mary up on the stage and everyone sang happy birthday," she said. "It was wonderful."

Ms. Bender has adapted special children's versions of consecrations to the Blessed Virgin Mary, and she encourages parents to consecrate their children to Mary.

After-school prayer groups are not babysitting services, she said. They're designed to help children become closer to God. Children pray for their own special intentions and those of their family and friends, she said. They also read the Bible, participate in Marian processions, learn about the lives of the saints and pray the rosary.

"I think everyone needs a chance to fall in love with Jesus Christ," said Ms. Bender, noting that about 50 children attend the prayer sessions. "To do that, you need a prayer life."

Children often say prayers or make observations that almost cause their instructor to cry.

"Kids do worry about a lot of things - you'd be surprised," she said. "You have to be patient and kind because everything they say is the most important thing in their life."

During a recent prayer group session, children prayed for a school family whose father is going to Iraq for six months.

"He has three boys in the school," said Ms. Bender, a Frostburg native who also teaches in the parish's RCIA program. "We tell them the whole school is praying for them."

Father J. Collin Poston, St. Mary's administrator, said Ms. Bender inspires many people to go deeper in their faith. When he was considering becoming a priest, Father Poston often prayed at St. Mary where he would inevitably run into Ms. Bender.

"She was very encouraging," he remembered. "She means a lot to this parish and to the school."

Hagerstown's prayer warrior, a mother of five and grandmother of 10, has no plans of slowing down.

"I don't feel I get tired because the enthusiasm of the people rubs off on you," she said. "It agrees with me."