The images of Mary

Although May is the month set aside for particular devotion to the Blessed Mother, February contains two great feast days in her honor: The Purification on Feb. 2 and the Apparition of Our Lady of Lourdes on Feb. 11.

Perhaps Father John Lynch of our diocese gave Mary the most fitting of titles in his prose poem called "A Woman Wrapped in Silence." Over the centuries Our Lady has been addressed in many ways and yet she remains a figure of great mystery.

Morning Star, Mirror of Justice, Gate of Heaven, Mystical Rose, Comforter of the Afflicted: these are but a few of the names by which Mary is addressed in the Litany of Loreto. For those at sea, she is Stella Maris, Star of the Sea. In time of war, she is Queen of Peace.

Down through the years, while debates about doctrine absorbed theologians and philosophers, while crises of faith swirled in intellectual circles, the ordinary lay-person stayed rooted in simple devotion to Our Lady. Throughout medieval Europe the days began and ended with the rhythm of the Angelus. The very core of Christian faith is contained in the brief prayer said at the end of it: Incarnation, Passion, Cross and Resurrection.

In the fields, at the marketplaces and around the table, the message of salvation was like the pulse-beat of the people: assumed, relentless, almost unnoticed. "The Angel of the Lord declared unto Mary ..."

Women today still look to Mary as a model of Woman-story, Herstory, as feminists call history. She is one who experienced exile, oppression, hardship and sorrow. Long before the sociological term "Single Head of Household" was coined, Mary was a widow with a child. And living as she did, in a patriarchal society, she had no legal rights, no security. After the death of her son, Mary was totally dependent on the charity of others.

It is this image of Our Lady, the woman who was poor, that speaks so clearly to us today. The woman on welfare, the homeless "bag lady," the immigrant woman in this alien land: each was foreshadowed in Mary, each was proclaimed by her in the great hymn of Magnificat. "God's mercy is from generation to generation ... God has exalted the lowly and filled the hungry. The rich have been sent empty away."

Each of us has a story of pain or sorrow to tell. Each of us can still turn to this Mother of Mercy whenever we mourn and weep in this valley of tears. That image of human sadness comes to us from the hymn which still ends the day of prayer in monasteries throughout the world. Salve Regina; Hail, Holy Queen, Mother of Mercy ..."

Perhaps now, in this era of sophistication and technology, in this time of war and rumors of war, that prayer is more appropriate than ever. "Pray for us, O Holy Mother of God, that we may become worthy of the promises of Christ."

Those promises, spoken by Jesus in the Beatitudes were fulfilled in Mary, the blessed one among all women. So may they be in us all.