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Dear Sisters,

The theme of our last CIB Symposium which I just attended was: BENEDICTINE WOMEN: WITNESSES OF HOPE. This issue will carry the first input in that symposium, Sr. Judith Ann Heble's: MARY, WOMAN OF HOPE. In fact that assembly of more than 100 women from 59 countries, of different colors, different habits (or lack of habit), nationalities, ethnicity, languages but nevertheless living the spirit of St. Benedict, was itself a real sign of HOPE – that from a tower of Babel, we can achieve a unity of heart and mind. The atmosphere was so congenial, friendly, and serene. At our table, we had a Swiss, an American, an Argentinian, an African, a Brazilian, an Italian and myself—a Filipina. When we were sharing we patiently waited for the Argentinian translating the English into Italian for the Italian and the Brazilian and me into Deutsch for the Swiss.

HOPE is really a wonderful feeling. It makes one buoyant, expectant, and zealous awakening those in acedia and apathy. Somehow, we experienced this feeling in the recent event of the change of administration in our country. But hope cannot be something that is just looking up and expecting a pie bye and bye. We have to work for the realization of our hope. And we begin with those that we can do in our areas of responsibility and with the resources that we have. And when we achieve some small successes or victories, these would be stepping stones for greater hope and fulfillment of bigger dreams.

In our Priory, such signs of hope are also present. Those who have experienced our third phase of renewal have expressed their joy and contentment. In our Catarman project, I am meeting people who are willing to help. Sr. Gisela of AIM accepted two project proposals and she is optimistic that she will find funders for it. I met the Prioress of the Lioba Sisters, Mother Scholastica Deck, who is the Chair of SCHWESTERNHILFE, who said she can get funding for the Sisters' Convent and Chapel of the hospital. Nonoy Tan's family is not only willing to donate the land, they are intent on helping us find the means to maintain the hospital, too. As a lawyer, Nonoy is actually now already working for the SEC approval of the Hospital Foundation.

BUT IN ALL THESE, WE KNOW THAT OUR SUREST BASIS OF HOPE IS OUR EXPERIENCE OF GOD'S FIDELITY AND LOVE.

Sincerely yours,



Sister Mary John Mananzan, OSB

STATIO CONFERENCE

The Rosary

By S. Josefina G. Nepomuceno, OSB

October 2010

"October is the month in which Mary Most Holy, Queen of the Holy Rosary, is venerated. Within the current international context, I invite all -- individuals, families, communities -- to pray this Marian prayer, possibly every day, for peace, so that the world can be preserved from the wicked scourge of terrorism." This was the message of John Paul II to the faithful on September 30, 2001, after the morning Mass opening the Synod of Bishops.

This plea of Pope John Paul II "to individuals, families, communities to pray this Marian prayer" was made soon after the attack on the Twin Towers in New York on September 11, 2001. The request is timed at the start of October the month of the Rosary and the intention is peace and the preservation from terrorism. Then on Sunday, June 29, 2002, Pope John Paul II declared with urgency: "I wish once again to entrust *the great cause of peace* to the praying of the Rosary. We are facing an international situation that is full of tensions, at times threatening to explode." (Angelus Message in Castel Gandolfo, June 29, 2002).

Once again the Rosary as a prayer weapon is invoked as it has been so many times in the past in the face of crisis, threats and times of danger and difficulty. The power of the Rosary is regaining recognition. Recourse to this Marian prayer at this time signals the revival of this devotion after years of neglect and indifference. That Pope John Paul II was the source of this appeal was perhaps understandable. Was he not the pope who openly declared his deep devotion to Mary? Was his motto as pope not "totus tuus" emblazoned in his papal coat of arms and unabashedly dedicated to Mary? He was undisputably the Marian pope. His preference for the rosary is therefore to be expected. He himself declared it.

I myself have often encouraged the frequent recitation of the Rosary. From my youthful years this prayer has held an important place in my spiritual life. I was powerfully reminded of this during my recent visit to Poland, and in particular at the Shrine of Kalwaria. The Rosary has accompanied me in moments of joy and in moments of difficulty. To it I have entrusted any number of concerns; in it I have always found comfort." "The Rosary is my favourite prayer. A marvelous prayer! Marvelous in its simplicity and its depth..." (Rosarium Virginis Mariae, 2)

More recently, Pope Benedict XVI who is not widely identified as Marian, said this about the Rosary:

This ancient prayer is having a providential revival, thanks also to the example and teaching of the beloved Pope John Paul II. ...Today, together we confirm that the Holy Rosary is not a pious practice banished to the past, like prayers of other times thought of with nostalgia. Instead, the

Rosary is experiencing a new springtime. Without a doubt, this is one of the most eloquent signs of love that the young generation nourishes for Jesus and his Mother, Mary.” (Address at Sta. Maria Maggiore, May 3, 2008).

Rosary Revival

Why is the Rosary having a revival? Does it need a revival? Was it not always the most popular Catholic prayer devotion to Mary? Through the centuries since its first appearance as a form of prayer the Rosary has been recited by Catholics as individuals, as families, as communities in church services specially in May and October, in pilgrimages to shrines of Mary. “The Rosary of the Virgin Mary, which gradually took form in the second millennium under the guidance of the Spirit of God, is a prayer loved by countless Saints and encouraged by the Magisterium.” “A prayer of great significance, destined to bring forth a harvest of holiness. It blends easily into the spiritual journey of the Christian life (RVM, 1) The Rosary was the identifying mark of Catholics.

Even nations facing grave threat to their civilization and values they hold dear prayed the Rosary and were delivered as by a miracle from their opponents who were vastly superior in number and weaponry. The victory of the Christian fleet over the Muslims at the naval battle of Lepanto in the Gulf of Corinth on October 7, 1571 was attributed to the help of the holy Mother of God whose aid was invoked through praying the rosary The Muslims were trying to take over all Europe. The Pope explicitly attributed that victory to Rosary processions being held the day of the victory; in addition, every man on the Christian flagship had been given a Rosary before the battle. (William G. Most, *Marian Devotions and Apparitions*). The feast of the Holy Rosary was established by Saint Pius V on the anniversary of this historic naval victory. In 1683: Rosary played a role in the victory over the numerous Moslem invaders at Vienna. (Rosary Highlights) and at Temmeswar and Corfu in 1716. Similarly, the victory of the poorly equipped Spanish naval forces over the Dutch fleet in the battle of Manila bay was attributed to the intervention of Mary through the praying of the Rosary. Thus we in the Philippines also have the feast of La Naval de Manila on the feast of Our Lady of the Rosary on October 7.

Fast track to the 19th century, the tradition of praying the Rosary in the month of October was instituted by Pope Leo XIII in an encyclical *Supremi Apostolatus Officio* issued September 1, 1883. This first encyclical (1883) prescribed the public recitation of the rosary and the Litany of Loreto in Catholic churches and chapels as a special observance "for the month of October of this year." This was the first of a total of eleven, others say twelve encyclicals issued every September from 1883 to 1898 which promoted the praying of the rosary. For this reason, “Rosary Pope” is the title given to Leo XIII who established the feast of the Queen of the Holy Rosary also in 1883. We recognize him as the author of the social encyclical *Rerum Novarum*. Closer to us Missionary Benedictines, Leo XIII was the pope who on June 29, 1884 gave the approval to Fr. Andreas Amrhein to found a mission seminary with permission for the training of candidates. (Our Constitutions, xiii).

The Support of Popes

The encouragement by the encyclicals of Pope Leo XIII of the public recitation of the rosary in churches conferred a new status on the rosary. "No longer was the rosary a devotion best suited to the illiterate." It now was officially encouraged as public devotion. (Marian Library Newsletter, Mary Page. <http://www.udayton.edu/mary>)

Why did Pope Leo XIII promote the praying of the rosary so insistently to the universal Church? Pope Leo's papacy was after Vatican I in 1871 which was hastily adjourned due to the wars of unification of Germany and Italy and the subsequent confiscation of the papal estates, the diminishment of Papal power to what eventually became the Vatican State and the "imprisonment" of the pope in the confines of the Vatican.

The themes of the Pope Leo's encyclicals expanded from the Rosary as a devotion to its significance to society and the Church facing grave challenges to its influence and even its very life and.

Beginning in 1891, the encyclicals dwell on the value of the rosary and on its role within the life of the Church and of society. In these encyclicals, there is frequent reference to the perilous situation in which the Church found itself: anticlerical governments and forces opposed to religion threatened its existence. Diplomatic relations between Italy and the Holy See were nonexistent, and the pope was the "prisoner" within the Vatican walls. The Kulturkampf limited the Church in Germany and Switzerland; the governments of France and Belgium wished to obtain control of the religious schools and to expel the religious teaching congregations. Freemasonry, addressed by the pope in an encyclical, was openly hostile to the Church, and the findings of science seemed to refute long-held religious teachings.

As response to these trying times, Leo XIII followed the example of previous popes by proposing the rosary as a "weapon" which St. Dominic, eight centuries earlier, had confided to the Church. It was through the rosary that Dominic had overcome the Albigensian heresy, whose adherents lived in the southwest of France (not far removed from Lourdes) ... The rosary would continue to be "balm for the wounds of society" as it had been in the time of Dominic, and it would make possible the two great goals of Leo's papacy-- the renovation of Christian life and the reunion of Christendom. (Marian library Newsletter).

In our own time and in our own country, we had our EDSA I in February 1986, a testament of faith in Mary's powerful support and presence assured by the praying of the Rosary.

About a million people, standing guard at the gates of Aguinaldo and Crame, and surrounding thousands of troops in battle-green, and APC's and even tanks were staging their "revolution of non-violence". Their only weapons were prayers and rosaries, bread and flowers, holy hymns and friendly words – and faith, great faith in each other as Filipinos and faith in God.

We thank our Blessed Mother Mary who was everywhere with us, on those three days of wonder and courage. There was no human barricade formed, no line of peaceful battle drawn, but she was there with us. Guns and tanks faced fathers and mother, sons and daughters, nuns and seminarians... who had only rosaries in their hands and songs to Mary on their lips. (Jaime Cardinal Sin, Mary, Our Lady of EDSA, p.72).

In Pope Leo XIII's encyclicals "the rosary was broadly defined, just as it had been described four centuries earlier when approved in 1571 by Pius V."

The essence of the rosary was "to recall the mysteries of salvation in succession, [while] the subject of meditation is mingled and interlaced with the Angelic Salutation and prayer to God the Father" (1883). Meditation on the mysteries of salvation was a short and easy method to nourish

faith and to preserve it from ignorance and error (1895). The mysteries of salvation were not abstract truths but events in the lives of Jesus and Mary. (Marian Newsletter).

In 2002, Pope John Paul II declared, "The Rosary, though clearly Marian in character, is at heart a Christocentric prayer. In the sobriety of its elements, it has all the *depth of the Gospel message in its entirety*, of which it can be said to be a compendium." RVM, 1) Thus the nature of the Rosary has been clarified as a prayer that is derived from the Gospel, therefore is based on Scriptures and Marian in expression.

The evolution of the Rosary

The Rosary as we pray it today went through a long evolution over many centuries. There are a number of strands of tradition which meant that the Rosary did not grow neatly in a linear line of development. The best known attribution is to St. Dominic to whom Our Lady is said to have appeared in 1214 She gave him the rosary as a weapon against the Albigensian heresy which Dominic was battling rather unsuccessfully. However, the prayer was used before Dominic's time.

According to one line, the rosary dates back to the 9th century when Irish monks recited and chanted the 150 psalms of the Bible. People living nearby were drawn to the beautiful prayer and wanted to join the monks' prayer. But they could not adopt this form of prayer because as they were mostly unlettered folk they found it very hard to memorize the psalms and copies were not available. As a kind of substitute, the people were encouraged to recite 150 "Our Fathers." This became known as the poor man's psalter. To keep count of their Our Fathers, they started to use pebbles first in a pouch but eventually knotting 150 pieces of wood on a string.

When Irish monks traveled throughout Europe they brought this form of devotion with them. Soon, both priests and lay people began to recite the "Angelic Salutation" which is the first part of our Hail Mary as part of the devotion. The popularity of this prayer led to the adoption of 50 Angelic Salutations being said for each piece of wood or knot on the prayer string. (Dan Rudden)

In the 12th and early 13th century, Our Lady's psalter was developed which consisted of 150 Hail Marys. These were divided into groups of 50 and were referred to as "Rosariums". Although "rosarium" refers to roses and rose gardens, it was used to signify a collection of prayers which could be compared to a bouquet of roses. (Dan Rudden) Alan de la Roche in the 15th century introduced meditations on the incarnation, the passion and the glorification of Christ to be made on the 150 Hail Marys. By early 16th century, the 15 mysteries were organized and praying of the rosary took the form as is known now. (Crighton, p 89)

The interpretation of the psalms into written Psalters lead to the implementation of special thoughts or meditations being attached to each bead. Around the year 1700, the thoughts used in the rosary started to become narratives. St. Louis de Montfort composed the most common set of narratives that eventually became used as meditations for each decade of the rosary. These narratives were divided into five Joyful, five Sorrowful, and five Glorious meditations that are referred to as "mysteries". Just recently, in 2002, Pope John Paul II introduced another set of five meditations referred to as the "Luminous Mysteries".

[*So, the*] rosary we know today is the result of many evolutions dating back several hundred years. Although the manner in which the rosary is recited has changed, the results of praying the rosary are still the same. Countless interventions still occur today, and the power and divine graces the rosary offers are available to everyone who is willing to give it a chance. (Dan Rudden)

The rosary has always been available, but after Vatican II when most things Marian were swept away by the liturgical renewal, the praying of the rosary went through a kind of eclipse. While in former times, praying the rosary was learned from childhood, there are now generations of Catholics particularly in the West who no longer pray the rosary. Some even look at it as non-modern, some form of retrogression, a movement backward in the post Vatican II period when prayer has to be Scriptural and aligned to the renewed liturgy. Devaluing the Rosary was part of the movement away from Mary herself which, sad to say, is most noticeable in westernized more sophisticated religious men and women. But the masses of simple Catholics who continued to look to Mary with affection and trust continued to pray the Rosary.

A revival of the Rosary needed? It certainly is. The wonderful thing about this revival is that the Rosary is now presented in its true character as a Christocentric, Gospel-based multi-leveled contemplative prayer with a rhythm and cadence of oral recitation. The Rosary, it is now emphasized, is not a prayer to Mary, but *a prayer with Mary*. It is a prayer appropriate to the most simple child and to the most theology- sophisticated adult. It speaks to the illiterate as well as the most highly educated Catholic. The prayer that is a common denominator of popes, saints and the most simple unlettered Catholic fingering the beads in a barangay chapel is regaining its place as the preeminent Roman Catholic devotion. The credit for this renewed goes to the Popes and above all to the Blessed Mother herself.

Marian, Christocentric, a contemplative prayer

As mentioned earlier, in its evolution through the centuries, the Rosary had metamorphosed into a contemplative prayer. The Rosary is one of the traditional paths of Christian prayer directed to the contemplation of Christ's face. In defense of the Rosary against the elements in the Church that were downgrading the prayer, Pope Paul VI, in his Apostolic Exhortation *Marialis Cultus*, issued merely five years after the close of Vatican II, emphasized the Rosary's evangelical character and its Christocentric inspiration well in the spirit of the Second Vatican Council. (in RVM,1).

Pope Paul VI described it in these words: "As a Gospel prayer, centered on the mystery of the redemptive Incarnation, the Rosary is a prayer with a clearly Christological orientation. Its most characteristic element, in fact, the litany-like succession of *Hail Marys*, becomes in itself an unceasing praise of Christ, who is the ultimate object both of the Angel's announcement and of the greeting of the Mother of John the Baptist: 'Blessed is the fruit of your womb' (*Lk* 1:42).

It was Pope John Paul II in his comprehensive encyclical *Rosarium Virginis Mariae* issued in 2002 who clearly elucidated the Christocentric yet Marian character of the Rosary. "To recite the Rosary," he said, "is nothing other than to *contemplate with Mary the face of Christ*". (RVM3)

And just how important this contemplation is for every Christian disciple is explained:

To look upon the face of Christ, to recognize its mystery amid the daily events and the sufferings of His human life, and then to grasp the divine splendor definitively revealed in the Risen Lord, seated in glory at the right hand of the Father: this is the task of every follower of Christ and therefore the task of each one of us. (RVM, 3)

Mary is the “incomparable model” of this contemplation. “In a unique way the face of the Son belongs to Mary. It was in her womb that Christ was formed, receiving from her a human resemblance, which points to an even greater spiritual closeness. No one has ever devoted himself to the contemplation of the face of Christ as faithfully as Mary (RVM, 10)

As the model of contemplation, Mary “sets before the faithful the ‘mysteries’ of her Son with the desire that the contemplation of those mysteries *will release all their saving power.*” (emphasis supplied) And it is in the recitation of the Rosary that the Christian community enters into contact with the memories and the contemplative gaze of Mary. (RVM, 9)

What makes the Rosary “an exquisitely contemplative prayer” is that it starts with Mary’s own experience. “Without this contemplative dimension, it would lose its meaning as Pope Paul VI pointed out: ‘Without contemplation, the Rosary is a body without a soul, and its recitation runs the risk of becoming a mechanical repetition of formulas.... By its nature the recitation of the Rosary calls for a quiet rhythm and a lingering pace, helping the individual to meditate on the mysteries of the Lord’s life as seen through the eyes of her who was closest to the Lord. In this way the unfathomable riches of these mysteries are disclosed’”. (in RVM, 12)

Mary’s contemplation a “remembering”

Mary’s contemplation is above all *a remembering*. In the biblical sense, remembering is making present the works brought about by God in the history of salvation. The Biblical account of the saving events culminating in Christ himself belongs not only to “yesterday”; *they are also part of the “today” of salvation*. This making present takes place in the Liturgy: “what God accomplished centuries ago did not only affect the direct witnesses of those events; it continues to affect people in every age with its gift of grace. To some extent this is also true of every other devout approach to those events: to “remember” them in a spirit of faith and love is to be open to the grace that Christ won for us by the mysteries of His life, death and resurrection.” (RVM, 12)

The liturgy remains the summit of worship of the Church, of this remembering, but “the spiritual life is not limited solely to participation in the liturgy. Christians, while they are called to prayer in common, must also go to their own rooms to pray to their Father in secret (cf. *Mt* 6:6); indeed, according to the teaching of the Apostle, they must pray without ceasing” (cf. *I Thes* 5:17). This call to ceaseless prayer is answered by the Rosary.

The Rosary, in its own particular way, is part of this varied panorama of “ceaseless” prayer. If the Liturgy, as the activity of Christ and the Church, is *a saving action par excellence*, the Rosary too, as a “meditation” with Mary on Christ, is *a salutary contemplation*. By immersing us in the

mysteries of the Redeemer's life, it ensures that what he has done and what the Liturgy makes present is profoundly assimilated and shapes our existence. (RVM, 13)

Becoming conformed to Christ

Learning Christ is one of the deep desires of every disciple. Contemplating the scenes of the Rosary in union with Mary is a means of learning from her to "read" Christ, to discover His secrets and to understand His message. (RVM 14) Becoming conformed to Christ is the commitment of his disciples. (cf. *Rom* 8:29; *Phil* 3:10, 12). "In the spiritual journey of the Rosary, based on the constant contemplation - in Mary's company - of the face of Christ, this demanding ideal of being conformed to Him is pursued through an association that could be described in terms of friendship." (RVM, 15)

In this process of being conformed to Christ through the Rosary, we entrust ourselves in a special way to the maternal care of the Blessed Virgin. The Rosary mystically transports us to Mary's side as she is busy watching over the human growth of Christ in the home of Nazareth. This enables her to train us and to mold us with the same care, until Christ is "fully formed" in us (cf. *Gal* 4:19). (RVM, 16)

This role of Mary, totally grounded in that of Christ and radically subordinated to it, "in no way obscures or diminishes the unique mediation of Christ, but rather shows its power". Pope John Paul II explains, "This is the luminous principle expressed by the Second Vatican Council, which I have so powerfully experienced in my own life and have made the basis of my episcopal motto: *Totus Tuus*" (RVM, 16)

Hence the most perfect of all devotions is undoubtedly that which conforms, unites and consecrates us most perfectly to Jesus Christ. Now, since Mary is of all creatures the one most conformed to Jesus Christ, it follows that among all devotions that which most consecrates and conforms a soul to our Lord is devotion to Mary, His Holy Mother, and that the more a soul is consecrated to her the more will it be consecrated to Jesus Christ." Never as in the Rosary do the life of Jesus and that of Mary appear so deeply joined. Mary lives only in Christ and for Christ! (RVM 16)

Meditation and supplication

The Rosary is both meditation and supplication. Insistent prayer to the Mother of God is based on confidence that her maternal intercession can obtain all things from the heart of her Son. She is "all-powerful by grace"

"When in the Rosary we plead with Mary, the sanctuary of the Holy Spirit (cf. *Lk* 1:35), she intercedes for us before the Father, who filled her with grace and before the Son born of her womb, praying with us and for us." (RVM, 16)

Proclamation and instruction

The Rosary is also *a path of proclamation and increasing knowledge*, in which the mystery of Christ is presented again and again at different levels of the Christian experience. Its form is that of a prayerful and contemplative presentation, capable of forming Christians according to the heart of Christ. When the recitation of the Rosary combines all the elements needed for an effective meditation, especially in its communal celebration in parishes and shrines, it can present *a significant catechetical opportunity* that pastors should use to advantage. In this way too, Our Lady of the Rosary continues her work of proclaiming Christ. (RVM, 17)

Going farther, John Paul II declares, "Today we are facing new challenges. Why should we not once more have recourse to the Rosary, with the same faith as those who have gone before us? The Rosary retains all its power and continues to be a valuable pastoral resource for every good evangelizer." (RVM, 17)

Roots and grounds us in Christ

The Letter to the Ephesians makes this heartfelt prayer for all the baptized: "May Christ dwell in your hearts through faith, so that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have power ... to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God" (3:17-19). The Rosary is at the service of this ideal; it offers the "secret" that leads easily to a profound and inward knowledge of Christ. We might call it *Mary's way*. It is the way of the example of the Virgin of Nazareth, a woman of faith, of silence, of attentive listening. It is also the way of a Marian devotion inspired by knowledge of the inseparable bond between Christ and His Blessed Mother. (RVM, 24)

For a more effective praying of the Rosary

The important question then is, how can the praying of the Rosary bring about the desired effects in a Christian's life as brought up by Pope John II? The Pope himself comes up with some practical suggestions which enhance the existing structure of the Rosary without changing it.

1. Announcing each mystery, and perhaps even use a suitable icon to portray it, is as it were *to open up a scenario* on which to focus our attention. (RVM, 29)
2. In order to supply a Biblical foundation and greater depth to our meditation, it is helpful to follow the announcement of the mystery with *the proclamation of a related Biblical passage*, long or short, depending on the circumstances. (RVM, 30)
3. *Listening and meditation are nourished by silence*. After the announcement of the mystery and the proclamation of the Word, it is fitting **to pause and focus one's attention for a suitable period of time on the mystery concerned, before moving into vocal prayer**. RVM, 31)
4. After listening to the Word and focusing on the mystery, it is natural for *the mind to be lifted up toward the Father*. (RVM, 32)

5. *The ten "Hail Mary's* form the most substantial element in the Rosary and also the one that makes it a Marian prayer *par excellence*. Yet when the *Hail Mary* is properly understood, we come to see clearly that its Marian character is not opposed to its Christological character, but that it actually emphasizes and increases it. The center of gravity in the *Hail Mary*, the hinge as it was, that joins its two parts, is *the name of Jesus*. (RVM, 33) On the personal level, each "Hail Mary" suggests "the individual journey that each of us must take, from birth to death. It is marked by the biological rhythm of every life." (Spretnak, p. 137) As we pray the Hail Mary we acknowledge and entrust to Mary and Jesus the truth of our mortality.

6. The "Gloria" or Trinitarian doxology is the goal of all Christian contemplation. (RVM, 34)

A Prayer for peace

The Rosary has channeled the many and varied intentions of countless individuals and communities. Foremost among these intentions is the desire for peace. "*The Rosary is by its nature a prayer for peace*, since it consists in the contemplation of Christ, the Prince of Peace, the one who is "our peace" (*Eph 2:14*). Anyone who assimilates the mystery of Christ and this is clearly the goal of the Rosary learns the secret of peace and makes it his life's project. In a word, by focusing our eyes on Christ, the Rosary also makes us peacemakers in the world. By its nature as an insistent choral petition in harmony with Christ's invitation to "pray ceaselessly" (*Lk 18:1*), the Rosary allows us to hope that, even today, the difficult "battle" for peace can be won. (RVM, 40)

A prayer of the family and for the family

As a prayer for peace, the Rosary is also, and always has been, *a prayer of and for the family*. At one time this prayer was particularly dear to Christian families, and it certainly brought them closer together. It is important not to lose this precious inheritance. We need to return to the practice of family prayer and prayer for families, continuing to use the Rosary. (RVM, 41) Father Patrick Peyton's Rosary Crusade spread by the catchy motto, "The Family that prays together stays together" is perhaps more urgently needed today that the family is under siege from all fronts.

Healing power

Countless have been the instances of healings of all varieties of human ailments and suffering that have been attributed to the praying of the Rosary. Countless have been the crisis of all kinds – personal, family, national -that have been overcome through praying the Rosary. These mostly undocumented "little miracles" are passed around by word of mouth and reinforce the confidence and reliance on the power of the Rosary of the Virgin Mary.

Suffering and the Rosary

Why this is the case could be attributed to this insight shared by Spretnak: The Rosary is "the multilevel, multivalent contemplative device *par excellence* in the West... [*Its*] contemplative dimension is steeped in the experience of suffering and the transformation of suffering. It is

Mary's luminous treasure, available to all." (Spretnak, p.83) And that is because "Mary the Advocate or Intercessor has experienced a full range of suffering." (Ibid, 128)

It could be a case of identification with Mary, for "[a] person praying the rosary contemplates several of the events through the experience or the memory of Mary, almost *as Mary*, or at least with deep compassion. Even the Joyful mysteries contain elements of hardship." (Ibid, 132) Indeed, "[a]lmost all the Joyful mysteries foreshadow the suffering Mary will experience in later years. In short, a person praying the rosary with a request for compassionate intercession in, say the illness of a loved one is led to generate compassion *with* and for the spiritual figure – and for her Son – to whom one is appealing. (Ibid, 133)

Going through the cycle of the mysteries of the rosary bestows a personal benefit. "No matter where a person may be mentally fixated in the cycle because of a particular situation in his or her personal life, the exercise of moving through the progression aids one in achieving psychological and spiritual balance."(Ibid, 133) Peace of mind and tranquility of heart in the midst of incomprehensible sorrow flow from acceptance in faith of the situation as Mary often did.

According to Spretnak, "the rosary's deliverance of one's heart-mind to the divine 'cosmologic' has long been recognized as a spiritual 'path of the heart.' As such the rosary is associated not only with personal healing but with efforts for world peace, thanksgiving, or simply felt communion with the Divine. (Ibid, 136)

Speaking from her own experience, the author says: "The entire cycle delivers one to a level deeper than the intellectual or the emotional: to the matrix of the cosmologic where everything is held and nothing is lost."(Ibid, 134-135)

For this author who had at one time in her life stopped praying the rosary but picked it up again, "The revival of the rosary is one of the triumphs of the current Marian renewal, for its disappearance would be an inestimable loss for Western spirituality." (Ibid, 130) One of the values of the rosary is that it "holds an unbounded space for not only the personal but also the collective, for the welfare of all beings. The exhortation to pray the rosary for peace is the common ground linking nearly all visitations of Mary during the modern era, many of which have been reported during the current Marian renewal." (ibid, 137) This brings us to Mary's own campaign for the Rosary.

Mary's Campaign

During the period after Vatican II when most devotions and practices addressed to Mary were downgraded or outright discarded specially by the "progressive" elements in the Church, Mary was undaunted in her insistent requests for the praying of the Rosary. Already in Lourdes in 1858, she asked Bernadette to pray the Rosary. Her image as Lady of Lourdes depicts her holding a rosary. In Pontmain, the German invasion wave in 1871 was stopped by the praying of the rosary by the children to whom Mary appeared asking them to pray. (Albert Sahmon, p. 8) Then in Fatima her campaign for the Rosary was even more adamant as she called for a great increase of the praying of the Rosary, declaring it as one of the conditions for world peace and the conversion of Russia. "Pray the rosary daily," she asked. (Shamon, p. 90 This was at a time

when Russia was not yet communist. (Most, Marian Devotions and Apparitions) In fact, the need to say the Rosary is at the heart of the Fatima apparitions, as the following excerpt from her message attests.

The need to say the Rosary is also at the heart of the Fatima apparitions. The Blessed Virgin Mary spoke of it on several occasions. In 1917, the world was still suffering the horrors of the First World War with no end in sight. During the third apparition, on July 13, Our Lady insisted, “You must say the Rosary every day in honor of the Blessed Virgin to obtain the end of the war through her intercession, because only she can help.” And on October 13, she called herself the “Lady of the Rosary.” She asked that, during this traditional prayer, the following invocation be added at the end of each decade: “O my Jesus, forgive us our sins, save us from the fires of Hell; lead all souls to Heaven, especially those most in need of Your mercy.” (Message of Our Lady of Fatima)

In the third secret of Fatima, she is quoted as saying, “All those who pray humbly the rosary will have the protection of heaven.” (Third Secret of Fatima)

In many of her many subsequent and even current visitations Mary has expressed the need for prayer and singled out the praying of the rosary as a powerful force for peace. Most prominent among these apparitions are those in Medjugorje starting 1981 and continuing today, that have drawn millions of pilgrims from all over the world and of different religious persuasions, despite the silence of the official Church on the authenticity of these apparitions. Here, too Mary has consistently asked for conversion, sacrifice, prayer, specially the Rosary as a prayer for peace.

Quietly and without publicity, the Marian Movement of Priests, began by Fr. Stefano Gobbi in 1973 on the inspiration of Mary in Fatima, has spread over countries and continents. Its primary purpose is to gather priests through retreats and in the Cenacle which is explained thus: “Since the cenacle is where we gather to pray with Mary, the recitation of the rosary, Mary's prayer par excellence, is characteristic to all cenacles.” Mary herself has given the assurance, *“When you recite the rosary you invite me to pray with you and, each time, I truly join in your prayer.”* (Mary to her Beloved Priests, 148p, Feb. 11, 1978) “The prayer of my predilection is the holy rosary. For this reason, in my apparitions, I always ask that it be recited.” (Ibid, no. 275)

Recently a video clip was shown of a typical day in the life of the Pope Benedict XVI. At midday he takes a walk through the Vatican gardens with companions — all of them saying the Rosary together. When TV cameras caught him on film during his summer break in the mountains, again he was walking along saying his rosary. The Holy Father thus “walks the talk” for he said, “The Rosary, when it is prayed in an authentic way, not mechanical and superficial but profoundly, brings, in fact, peace and reconciliation. It contains within itself the healing power of the Most Holy Name of Jesus, invoked with faith and love at the centre of each “Hail Mary”. (Benedict XVI Address at Sta. Maria Maggiore, May 3, 2008)

The social effects of the Rosary have been invoked and proven. These effects still depend on the individual level, for praying of the Rosary is first and foremost a personal spiritual activity. It is on this personal level that we enter the school of Mary and contemplate with her the mysteries of Jesus Christ. It is in this school of contemplation that we experience Mary's experiences drawing us to a spirituality of deeper faith, greater trust and confidence particularly in times of darkness,

difficulty and crisis. We are gradually conformed to Jesus as we learn courage, generosity, endurance, poverty in humble submission and loving surrender to the Father's will, hope in the promises of a faithful God and certainty of arriving into eternal bliss.

May the Rosary prayed with Mary be again an integral part of the prayer life of our Sisters.

Suggestions for Individual Reflection:

1. On this Statio day, take time to pray the Rosary contemplatively, meditating on the mysteries.
2. Bring back to mind a time in your life or in the life of your family when praying the Rosary helped you face or resolve a crisis or difficulty. Say a prayer of thanks for it.

For group sharing:

1. Share your own personal experience of the power of the Rosary in your life or that of your family.
2. Think of suggestions to propagate the praying of the Rosary.
3. Discuss on how the Rosary can be a source of support in the continuing critical situation of our country.

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Beautiful Reasons for Praying the Rosary Even More Often

Such a beautiful rationale for the rosary...

Father Gabriel Amorth, Chief Exorcist of the Vatican writes: One day a colleague of mine heard the devil say during an exorcism, "Every Hail Mary is like a blow on my head. If Christians knew how powerful the Rosary was, it would be my end."

The secret that makes this prayer so effective is that the Rosary is both prayer and meditation. It is addressed to the Father, to the Blessed Virgin, and to the Holy Trinity, and is a meditation centered on Christ. I write in addition to the above: Please enunciate each word of the Rosary clearly and distinctly.

Do not trample on the heels of the words of anyone with your words. Do not speak over the leader, if you are following or the respondent if you are leading the Rosary. Remember that they also are having a conversation with Mary Our Mother and it is not polite to speak when someone else is speaking.

In the case of the public Rosary there are only two people speaking: the Leader and the respondents. Each is speaking to the Blessed Mother and listening carefully to her response within their hearts as they meditate on the scene before them in their consideration of the mystery being spoken of and interpreted and translated into their lives.

Spread this powerful prayer of exorcism, the Rosary, which contains the Our Father, the Perfect Prayer, prayed five times in the recitation of each set of the Rosary's Mysteries, backed up by the powerful prayers of Our Mother who prays with us as we pray 53 Hail Mary's.

The Eternal Father described to a group of us, through a Visionary Friend of mine, what happens when we pray the Rosary, saying, "When you pray Holy Mary Mother of God, pray for us sinners now....., the Blessed Mother comes instantly to your side to pray with you. And she does not come alone.

She brings angels with her. And not just one or two for she is the Queen of Angels, so choirs of angels come with her. And she and Jesus are joined at the heart and cannot be separated so she brings Jesus with her. And Jesus cannot be separated from the Trinity so He brings the Father and the Holy Spirit with Him. And where the Holy Trinity is, all of creation is, and you are surrounded by such beauty and light as you cannot imagine in this life. Your Mother comes as Our Lady of Grace with her hands outstretched.

Rays of light emit from her hands piercing your body, healing you and filling you with graces. This is your inheritance which was poured out from the heart of Jesus on the Cross, when the centurion pierced His Heart with the spear, into the only pure vessel ready to receive such graces at that time, Your Mother.

Now as you pray the Rosary, or even just recite one Hail Mary, You receive your portion of these graces. "He also said at this time, "Anyone who goes to Mary and prays the Rosary cannot be touched by Satan." Is it any wonder that anyone who prays the Rosary from the heart is so blessed and protected and powerful in their prayers for others?

The Mysteries of the Rosary

By tradition, Catholics meditate on these Mysteries during prayers of the Rosary.
The biblical references follow each of the Mysteries below.

The Joyful Mysteries

(Mondays and Saturdays)

1. The Annunciation (Luke 1:26-38) [Spiritual fruit - Humility]
2. The Visitation (Luke 1: 39-56) [Spiritual fruit - Love of Neighbor]
3. The Nativity (Luke 2:1-20) [Spiritual fruit - Poverty of Spirit]
4. The Presentation (Luke 2:21-38) [Spiritual fruit - Purity of mind & body]
5. The Finding of Jesus in the Temple (Luke 2:41-52) [Spiritual fruit - Obedience]

The Luminous Mysteries or Mysteries of Light

(Thursdays) see *Rosarium Virginis Mariae*

1. Jesus' Baptism in the Jordan (II Corinthians 5:21, Matthew 3:17 and parallels)
[Spiritual fruit - Gratitude for the gift of Faith]
2. Jesus' self-manifestation at the wedding of Cana (John 2:1- 12) [Spiritual fruit - Fidelity]
3. Jesus' proclamation of the Kingdom of God, with His call to conversion (Mark 1:15,
Mark 2:3-13; Luke 7:47- 48, John 20:22-23) [Spiritual fruit - Desire for Holiness]
4. Jesus' Transfiguration (Luke 9:35 and parallels) [Spiritual fruit - Spiritual Courage]
5. Jesus' institution of the Eucharist, as the sacramental expression of the Paschal Mystery.
(Luke 24:13-35 and parallels, 1 Corinthians 11:24-25) [Spiritual fruit - Love of our
Eucharistic Lord]

The Sorrowful Mysteries

(Tuesdays and Fridays)

1. The Agony in the Garden (Matthew 26:36-46, Luke 22:39-46)
[Spiritual fruit - God's will be done]
2. The Scourging at the Pillar (Matthew 27:26, Mark 15:15, John 19:1)
[Spiritual fruit - Mortification of the senses]
3. The Crowning with Thorns (Matthew 27:27-30, Mark 15:16-20, John 19:2)
[Spiritual fruit - Reign of Christ in our heart]
4. The Carrying of the Cross (Matthew 27:31-32, Mark 15:21, Luke 23:26-32, John 19:17)
[Spiritual fruit - Patient bearing of trials]
5. The Crucifixion (Matthew 27:33-56, Mark 15:22-39, Luke 23:33-49, John 19:17-37)
[Spiritual fruit - Pardoning of Injuries]

The Glorious Mysteries

(Wednesdays and Sundays)

1. The Resurrection (Matthew 28:1-8, Mark 16:1-18, Luke 24:1-12, John 20:1-29)
[Spiritual fruit - Faith]
2. The Ascension (Mark 16:19-20, Luke 24:50-53, Acts 1:6-11) [Spiritual fruit - Christian Hope]
3. The Descent of the Holy Ghost (Acts 2:1-13) [Spiritual fruit - Gifts of the Holy Spirit]
4. The Assumption [Spiritual fruit - To Jesus through Mary]
5. The Coronation [Spiritual fruit - Grace of Final Perseverance]

MIRYAM – WOMAN OF HOPE CIB Symposium Reflection Sister Judith Ann Heble, OSB, Moderator September 8, 2010

It is most appropriate that this 2010 CIB Symposium opens on this Feast of the Nativity of Mary. It is also the 51st anniversary day of my entrance to my community. May Mary, woman of hope, companion us during these Symposium days.

I must first confess that I have not always had a deep devotion to Mary. It was not until I visited the shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico City in December of 1991, that I began to appreciate and love and honor Mary.

I would like to tell the story of Mary – a WOMAN OF HOPE – as a result of my reflections throughout this year on a few familiar Scripture texts.¹ I will basically follow the story line of the Gospel of Luke, though you will find that I have also drawn some reflections from the other Gospels and even the Acts of the Apostles.

This will be a kind of Christian midrash on the life of Mary. Even so, “that is not to say that it is nothing. Midrash, Judaism teaches us, is what the heart knows has gone on between the lines of scripture that scripture did not detail for the mind: Noah’s fear, Abraham’s confusion, Miriam’s jubilation over the rescue of Moses, Joseph’s anxiety, Mary’s determination, Veronica’s empathic presence. They all live clearly in the human heart, the truth for which no truth is needed.”²

ANNUNCIATION Lk. 1:26-38

¹ All Scripture quotes and the general story line are taken from The Catholic Study Bible, New American Bible (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, Inc., 1990).

² Chittister, Joan, The Friendship of Women, A Spiritual Tradition, (Erie, PA: Benetvision, 2000), p.37.

**“MY SOUL PROCLAIMS THE GREATNESS OF THE LORD;
MY SPIRIT REJOICES IN GOD MY SAVIOR!” (Lk. 1:46-47)**

My name is Miryam. I lived with my parents in a small home, in northern Israel, in Nazareth, a town of Galilee. One day, I was busy about the house work, when suddenly, what looked like an angel, appeared to me. I was taken totally by surprise. I had never seen an angel before, though I did hear of them from my reflection on the traditions of my ancestors. The angel said to me, “Hail, favored one! The Lord is with you.” (Lk. 1:28) I was deeply troubled and shook with fear. The angel tried to reassure me and even called me by name, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.” (Lk. 1:30) How would this stranger know that?

Then came a very troubling message. “Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name him Jesus. He will be great and he will be called Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give him the throne of David his father, and He will rule over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.” (Lk. 1:31-33)

I shook my head in disbelief. My seemingly quiet and ordinary life was being turned upside down by the angel’s message.³ I didn’t quite understand what was just said to me. I was to have a child? Even his name, Jesus, was already picked out.

I had heard of the coming of a Messiah. In fact, in our family, we had great hope for the coming of the Messiah, but I never dreamed that I would have anything to do with it, let alone be chosen as the mother of the Messiah. Would this be the Child of Hope for whom all creation yearned?⁴

My heart was pounding! Taking a deep breath, I mustered up all the courage I could find deep down within me and I asked the angel, “How can this be, since I have had no relations with a man?” (Lk. 1:34) I was a virgin and expected to remain as such until my official marriage to Joseph.

Then the angel told me something even more astounding. “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore, the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God.” (Lk. 1:35) I could feel a lump in my throat; a tightness in my chest. I wished that my mother, my father, – even Joseph, would show up. There I was all alone grappling with this astounding announcement.

Then the angel told me something amazing about my elderly cousin, Elizabeth. “Elizabeth, your relative, has also conceived a son in her old age, and this is the sixth month for her who was called barren; for nothing will be impossible for God.” (Lk. 1:36-37) Oh, my!

³ Hughes, Mary, OP., LCWR Update – December, 2009, p. 2.

⁴ Eckes, Lois, Pathways, Newsletter of the Duluth Benedictines, Vol. 21, No. 2, Advent, 2009, p. 2.

This was all a bit much! I who was a virgin was to have a child by the Holy Spirit. Elizabeth – old and beyond child-bearing years is already pregnant for six months!

I didn't know what to say! As I pondered these things in my heart, I thought about all that my parents had taught me about the ways of God, about always wanting to do the will of God, about unshakable hope in God no matter what is asked of me. I just kind of sat in profound silence my head in my hands, my heart pounding. Was "I willing to follow God no matter what, even when the road is marked by confusion, darkness, or less than desirable outcomes?"⁵ Could I be a woman of hope regardless of what was being asked of me?

Suddenly, a great calm came over me and I said quietly and reverently, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word." (Lk. 1:38) 'Yes'! 'Yes' to what you're asking of me. 'Yes' to God's plan in my life – even if I do not fully understand it! 'Yes', 'yes', 'yes'! When I looked up, the angel was gone.

THE BIRTH OF JESUS Matthew 1:18-25

I had to speak with Joseph. When I found him, I discovered that something mysterious had happened to him as well. Joseph was a good and upright man. He learned that I was pregnant and was very distraught by the news. He said that he was unwilling to expose me to the law, and decided to divorce me quietly. Such was his intention, he said, when suddenly the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said to him, "Joseph, son of David, have no fear about taking Mary as your wife. It is by the Holy Spirit that she has conceived this child. She is to have a son and you are to name him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins." (Mt. 1:20-21)

Joseph told me that when he awoke he, too, said 'yes'. He told me that he was willing to take me into his home as his wife. What a dear, dear man. I was willing to marry him and to have him as my husband. Though the child I would have was not his, I knew that he would make a wonderful foster father. Did we really know what was happening? We hoped that what we both had said 'yes' to, would work out well for us. We had no idea what the birth of this child would mean for us or for the world at that time or forever.

VISITATION Luke 1:39-80

I told Joseph the news about Elizabeth and that I needed to travel to Ein Karem, "tucked away in the steep hills just west of Jerusalem,"⁶ to visit her and to help her out. Her husband, Zachary,

⁵ Jones, Gloria Marie, OP, *The Occasional Papers*, "Elijah: Follow God No Matter What", (Silver Spring, MD: Leadership Conference of Women Religious), Vol. 37, #2, Summer, 2008, p. 16.

⁶ Stuhmueller, Carroll, C.P., *Biblical Mediations for Advent and the Christmas Season*, (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1980), p. 76.

was elderly, too. He couldn't possibly be much help!

Joseph assisted me in preparing for the journey. It would be long and difficult, about 75 miles or 120 kilometers over very rugged terrain. Joseph kissed me good-bye and helped me get astride the donkey. He held my hand tightly. As we looked into each other's eyes, we said farewell to one another and he smiled tenderly at me. I would miss sharing with him the growth of the baby in my womb. I would miss his understanding and loving ways.

During the journey, I wondered what Elizabeth was thinking. How was she feeling? When I arrived at the home of Zachary and Elizabeth, I entered the house and greeted her. We held each other tenderly. Both of us knew something was different about each of us. This visit would be "a mystery of unalloyed joy."⁷ When I greeted Elizabeth, the baby in her womb leapt, and she grabbed her swollen stomach. Elizabeth's face was aglow. I knew she was filled with indescribable joy. I could tell by the glow on her face that it was other-worldly – even something divine. Could it be the presence of the Holy Spirit?

She held me in her arms. Elizabeth somehow knew that I, her young cousin, was bearing the Promised One that her people were longing for.⁸ She cried out in a loud voice, "Most blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb." (Lk. 1:42) How did she know about my being pregnant? Then she said to me, "And how does this happen to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For at the moment the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby leaped in my womb for joy." (Lk. 1:43-44)

I had always known that Zachary and Elizabeth were people of great faith. I knew that they held out hope for the coming of a Messiah – a Savior of the world. I knew why they were childless, for Elizabeth was sterile and both were now "senior citizens", advanced in age and beyond the possibility of child-bearing. .

Then Elizabeth, in profound humility, before me her young relative said, "Blessed are you who believed that what was spoken to you by the Lord would be fulfilled." (Lk.1:45) That touched me deeply. We hugged again and patted each one's stomach which held a child. We cried; we laughed; we wondered; we hoped. All I could do next was pray a canticle that I had learned from my tradition from another woman, Hannah, who had hoped greatly in the Lord, and bore a son, Samuel. So, I used her words,

**"MY SOUL PROCLAIMS THE GREATNESS OF THE LORD;
MY SPIRIT REJOICES IN GOD MY SAVIOR!" (Lk. 1:46-47)**

⁷ Romero, Mary Jane, OSB, *Spirit & Life*, "The Most Joyful of the Joyful Mysteries", (Tucson, AZ: Benedictine Sisters of Perpetual Adoration), Vool. 105:1, May-June, 2009, p. 9.

⁸ Ibid.

I stayed with Elizabeth for three months in Ein Karem. We discussed many things. She would name her child John. I would name mine Jesus. We wondered how they would grow up and if they would ever see each other given the distance we lived from one another. Would they get along together? She spoke to me of faith and trust even in the greatest moments of doubt and pain. She told me never to lose hope in God's mercy and fidelity. We prayed and sang psalms together. We praised the God of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Rachel. For God was fulfilling his promises to the people.⁹

Everyday for three months we prepared for the birth of our sons. I became the housekeeper, cook and helper, as the two of us engaged in knitting and weaving¹⁰ wondering and hoping. Together we shared deeply and fully the story of God's activities in our lives. We gave one another strength as we pondered fulfilling God's request of us.¹¹ I had first hand experience of what I would look like in my sixth to ninth months of pregnancy. I marveled at how beautiful Elizabeth was – an old woman large and heavy with new life in her womb. These days, weeks and months together, “were filled with a shared joy beyond description.”¹²

When I returned home, Joseph was so happy to see me. He hugged and kissed me and held me closely for a long time. He brought me into the house for something to eat. I told him of my stay with Elizabeth and what she had said of my being blessed among women. We spoke of how we would get ready for the birth of the baby. We did so want everything to turn out well in the last months of my pregnancy.

THE NATIVITY Luke 2:1-20

Then, suddenly, everything seemed to be turned upside down. “In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that the whole world should be enrolled.” (Lk. 2:1) There would be a census. We were to each go to our own town to be enrolled. Because Joseph was of the house and family of David, we would need to make the long trip from Nazareth to Bethlehem in Judea. The trip would be about 86 miles or 136 kilometers. Given my condition, it would take us a good week to get there. That night, I packed a few things for Joseph and me and some items in case my baby was born.

Early the next morning, we started out for Bethlehem. I was now nine months pregnant, and I found the ride that distance on a donkey very taxing on my body. I hoped that I could make it without delivering my baby along side of the road. Joseph was most solicitous. He would take my hand and walk alongside the donkey assuring me of his presence and love.

⁹ Romero, Op. Cit., p. 14.

¹⁰ Op. Cit., p. 9.

¹¹ Hughes, Op.Ciit., p. 2.

¹² Romero, Op. Cit., p. 9.

After many days we made it to Bethlehem. We knocked on a number of doors for lodging, but could not find a place because so many people had come down to Bethlehem for the census. We did find a deserted place – a kind of animal shelter. That would have to make due at least for the night. Maybe tomorrow, when it was light, we would be able to find a better place.

God again had other plans. There would be no more waiting. While we were there, the time came for me to have my child, and I gave birth to my firstborn son. It was not a difficult birthing and it did not take long. Joseph stood caringly by my side breathing and pushing with me. He was so dear. This was his first birthing experience as well. I knew for certain that he would be a good “foster father” for my son and a faithful spouse to me. I wrapped my baby in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger, a kind of feeding trough for animals.

Joseph and I spent the night delighting in the baby, so tiny, so fragile, so vulnerable. Joseph would hold him for a while and walk around with him, with a smile on his face, enamored by whom he held. I would hold him and breast feed him. So precious! Such a miracle! Such a sacrament of Hope! And here I was the minister!

The next thing we knew, there was the sound of voices outside the door of the cave. Could this be the owners telling us that we were trespassing? Where on earth would we go with a newborn baby? When Joseph went to see who it might be, a group of very excited shepherds barged in. They knelt before me as I held the baby in my arms. All out of breath, they told us that “the angel of the Lord appeared to them and the glory of the Lord shone around them.” (Lk. 2:9)

Excitedly, and often interrupting one another, they told us what the angel said: “Do not be afraid; for behold, I proclaim to you good news of great joy that will be for all people. For today in the city of David a savior has been born for you who is Messiah and Lord.” (Lk. 2:10-11) The angel also told them where to find us and that they would be given this sign: “You will find an infant wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.” (Lk. 2:12) Savior, Messiah, Lord – such profound titles for my little boy. What could all of this mean? With smiles on their faces, some toothless, dirty and smelly from their flocks, they left, bowing and backing out of the space where we were housed.

When we had a quiet moment together, Joseph and I spoke of the visit of the shepherds. We wondered about them, what their names were, what their families were like, would we ever see them again. We hoped that they were happy and successful as shepherds and able to provide for their families.

I kept all these things, reflecting on them in my heart. I shared my joy with Joseph. He, too, was overwhelmed with joy and reflected on these things in his heart. What would our future together

be like? We had both been taught from our ancestors, never to give up HOPE. We strengthened one another in this assurance.

After eight days, according to the Torah, we had the baby circumcised and named him Jesus.

(TO BE CONTINUED...)