NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Holding all things in our hearts

Patricia Datchuck Sánchez | Jan. 1, 2012

With great hope and genuine pride, the church begins this new year with a celebration of Mary, mother of Jesus, proto-disciple and model of strength, grace and courage for all believers. In his Christmas Eve homily in 1978, Salvadoran Archbishop Oscar Romero affirmed the important role of Mary in God?s plan of salvation.

She is ?the human instrument, the daughter of Adam, the daughter of Israel, a people?s embodiment, sister of our race. ... The truest homage that a Christian can make to Mary is, like her, to make the effort to incarnate God?s life in the fluctuations of our fleeting history? (*The Violence of Love*, The Plough Pub. Co., 1998).

Mary?s own history was inextricably bound to that of Jesus, and she is portrayed as such in scripture. Mary?s name is first mentioned in reference to Jesus? conception. She is featured, particularly by Luke and John, at each of the significant moments of Jesus? life, from his birth to his ministry, to his passion to his death on the cross and burial. Mary is also present with the nascent post-Easter church, as noted in Acts.

Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God
Numbers 6:22-27
Psalm 67
Galatians 4:4-7
Luke 2:16-21
Full text of the readings [1]

Wherever she is mentioned in scripture, Mary is represented as an exemplary disciple, that is, as one who hears the word of God and keeps it (Luke 11:21). The process of hearing God?s word and translating it into words and actions requires lifelong effort, and Luke gives us a clue as to how that effort began for Mary. In today?s Gospel, the evangelist tells his readers that ?Mary kept all these things, reflecting on them in her heart.? Literally translated, the Greek verb *symballein* means ?to toss things together in one?s heart.?

Mary?s pondering was not unique to her. Joseph?s father did the same when his son shared a revelatory dream with him (Gen 37:1). When Daniel interpreted Nebuchadnezzar?s dream, the Babylonian king ?kept with concern these things in his heart? (Daniel 4:28; 7:28). In the intertestamental Testament of Levi (6:2), Levi had a similar reaction when an angel opened heaven?s gate and allowed him to see God?s throne. These references, according to Raymond E. Brown, suggest an apocalyptic rather than a historic underpinning to the infancy narratives (*The Birth of the Messiah*, Doubleday, 1979). An angel-messenger has proclaimed the day of salvation, a sign has been given, heavenly hosts have appeared, and Mary, for whom these events must have been puzzling, kept everything in her heart.

Brown has also identified the wisdom tradition present in Mary?s action. Mary was like the scribe of Sirach 39:1-3 who kept with concern the parables, prophecies and mysterious sayings, reflecting on them in order to comprehend and live by them. As the wise man taught his son and urged him, ?Hold my words in your heart?

(Proverbs 3:1), so did Mary. Like the psalmist who said to God, ?I have hidden your sayings in my heart so that I may not sin? (Psalm 119:11), so said Mary.

Most scholars agree that full comprehension of all that she held and ?tossed about? and interpreted in her heart came much later for Mary. Only in time did she begin to fully appreciate the words of the angel messenger as well as those of Simeon, Elizabeth, Joseph, John and even Jesus. Her greatness lies in her willingness to go forward with a plan she did not understand, to a place she had not chosen, for the sake of a people who would reject and torture and kill her son.

By virtue of her position in God?s plan of salvation and her willingness to remain ?pregnant? with words and signs and purposes that would only later come to light and fruition, Mary is an able guide for all who venture into this new year. Emulating her and the Son she brought into the world, we can rejoice with Paul (Galatians, second reading) in the fact that we too are God?s children, near and dear enough to call God ?Abba,? ?Papa,? ?Daddy.? With Mary, we and all who believe enter into 2012 with the blessing from Numbers (first reading) to encourage and strengthen us. Like Mary, we hold this blessing in our hearts, allowing it to gestate there along with the echoes of the sacred texts that will inspire and guide us through the year. As events unfold, as people come and go in our lives, we will consider each of them in light of our sacred cache. Like Mary, we will keep all these things, reflecting on them in our hearts.

[Patricia Sánchez holds a master?s degree in literature and religion of the Bible from a joint degree program at Columbia University and Union Theological Seminary in New York.]

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