

black, plastic-beaded rosaries blessed at Medjugorje.

Yet Medjugorje, where millions of pilgrims have traveled during the past 20 years, isn't an official apparition site in the eyes of the church. So what does that make what was happening in Rochester?

The light goes on

In the end, it was James Howell who put my questions to rest. We've never met, but we have mutual Marian friends who met Howell on a trip to Medjugorje in 1998. "I was such a doubting Thomas," Howell recalls.

He grew up Catholic, became a hairdresser, had some wild times, and eventu-

ally found himself in the pouring rain one night on an Eastern European hillside.

Prayer from the mouths of French, Portuguese, Americans, and Germans quieted: Ivan Dragicevic was having an apparition.

Two things happened that April night, Howell says, that charged his life with new energy. "During the apparition, this one bird sang its little heart out. Then, I smelled roses." The signs were from Mary, he says, and filled him with peace.

"You know when you're little and you sit on your mom's lap? It's like that," he says. "Mary has a way of getting to you. You always know you can go to your mom."

"The message," Howell says, "is very simple: Love. Unconditional, good old-

fashioned love. If you're mad at somebody, get over it." Howell, a gay man, says he returned to Kansas City with the strength to live a celibate lifestyle. He also returned to Catholicism, joining an inner-city parish.

"Mary," he says, "chooses to whisper in your ear, but what you do with it is up to you."

Some see her in a dancing sun, some smell the roses, some see a radiant woman. Mary works for God, Howell says, and she delivers. "That's her . . . she's the little Volkswagen that gets you to the dealership where God is."

She drives different people in different ways, and "the one thing we all have," Howell says, "is peace."

Peace. **USC**

Virgin and Child, by Lucas Cranach the Elder (1525-30)



Is Mary a saint?

From the beginning, it was natural for the church to record and preserve stories of the lives of holy persons who died and are believed to be in glory with God in heaven. Chapter 7 of the Acts of the Apostles records the death of Stephen, a deacon who was stoned to death at Jerusalem and who is venerated as the first Christian martyr. It also describes the death of James the Greater, the first apostle to die for his faith, who was beheaded in the year 44. In spirit and action, their stories of faithfulness bring the doctrine of our faith to life.

Just as the early Christians had looked to the early martyrs as real-life examples of how to live as followers of Jesus, they recognized Mary of Nazareth's unique role in the mystery of Christ and honored her with special reverence.

The first artistic rendition of Mary that we know of is a third-century fresco on a wall of the underground chamber of the Catacombs of Priscilla on the ancient Via Salaria in Rome. When a few years ago I first saw this painting, known simply as the Madonna and Child, I was struck by the simplicity and tenderness still evident in what's left of the plaster image. Mary is seated on a throne and is clad in a short-sleeved tunic with a *palla* covering her head. Her body is slightly inclined, in an at-

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titude of motherly tenderness toward the child she holds in her arms.

In reality, by using a simple woman from Nazareth as the instrument through which to come into the world, God gave us a marvelous gift. Mary wanted to learn what it meant to love God through her life. She saw truth, mystery, and love and treasured them in her heart. There is no better example for us of what it means to be in an honest and intimate relationship with God, our Creator, than Mary.

Yes, Mary is a saint, but even among saints she holds a special place. As the Mother of God, Mary of Nazareth is our greatest model in faith. She was the very first Christian, the first one to say "yes" to the Word of God in her life. Mary was the first to acknowledge that Jesus is the Son of the almighty God.

Because she was closest to Christ, both as mother and as disciple, she is recognized by the church as the greatest of all saints, a "super-saint"! Obviously, Mary had a unique and singular place in the history of salvation. There is no better person to show us what it means to live out a "yes" life, choosing to bring God into the world every day.

No other person can accompany us on the Christian walk the way that Mary can. To paraphrase the late Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar, Mary, as the first Christian, shows what God's grace is capable of realizing in each one of us. **USC**

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