

An unusual companion

Bernadette Conklin is on a mission with a most unusual traveling companion, who's helping her to spread the word. Her name is Mary, she's three feet tall, and she creates a lot of attention wherever she goes. It's not just that Mary is pregnant. What captures interest is that this statue of the Virgin Mary shows Jesus in the womb surrounded by a rosary instead of an umbilical cord.

Conklin, a dental hygienist living in Evans City, Pennsylvania, calls the statue Mary, Ark of the New Covenant. The image of the girl who was called to be the mother of the Christ Child is the focus of the Preborn Jesus Ministry that she founded in 2009, now an approved lay apostolate in the Diocese of Pittsburgh.

Since then, she has taken the evangelization on the road to attend meetings and conferences, visit parishes and schools, appear on ETWN, and pray at vigils outside Planned Parenthood in Pittsburgh.

'Take me deeper'

The idea came into her heart during Lent of 2009, when she committed to a 30-day consecration to Jesus through Mary.

"I asked the Lord to take me deeper," she said.

Her understanding of Mary as the vessel of God incarnate grew. "We meditate on Jesus as the Risen Savior, as Crucified Lord, as babe in the manger, but not as preborn Jesus in the womb," she said.

She asked her son James, then 15, to sketch Mary with Jesus in the womb.

"I'm certainly not an artist or a theologian," she said.

They consulted sacred art for inspiration and also found Leonardo da Vinci's anatomical drawing of a fully formed baby in the womb. Conklin called her son's sketch "Vessel of the Preborn Jesus."

Several weeks later another image came to her mind when she was kneeling in church during Holy Hour.

"I saw Preborn Jesus within the womb of his mother," she said. "However, instead of an umbilical cord connecting the mother and child, I saw Our Lord encircled by a rosary. While the umbilical cord is the physical lifeline between mother and child, the rosary is the spiritual lifeline."

She asked her son to redraw the sketch, but the image continued to evolve. Conklin had it made into a poster for the annual March For Life in Washington, D.C. Before long, copies were circulating at marches, pregnancy centers, churches and at vigils outside of abortion clinics across the country. Wherever it's displayed, it becomes a powerful visual testimony to the sanctity of life.

"The rosary wraps the baby in prayer, and prayer is a protection from evil," Conklin said. "I have someone making rosary bracelets that I take to Planned Parenthood. I approach the women or boyfriends, and if they're open to contact, I tell them that someone is praying for them. I offer them a rosary bracelet as a tangible symbol of my prayers."

Shortly after local artist Lea Ravotti painted a watercolor of the sketch, Conklin was led to deeper understanding of Mary as the Ark of the New Covenant.

She envisioned another work of art of Mary with a crown of stars and her feet on the Ark of the Covenant. Douglas Vasco of Philadelphia carved that statue for her. Then, Pittsburgh artist James Sulkowski created oil paintings of Mary based on the statue and of Jesus of the Divine Mercy.

Led by the Spirit

Understanding Christ in the womb has an impact on Christians in several ways, Conklin explained. It's about Mary's role in God's plan for redemption, her example of cooperating with God's plans, the love that a mother has for her child, and Mary's role of mother to all who seek her son. It has become an icon for motherhood and the sanctity of life.

Conklin has copies of the paintings and the original drawing, holy cards and reproductions of the statue. Cardinal Stanislaw Dziwisz, former secretary to Pope St. John Paul II, blessed a print when her friend took it to the Divine Mercy Shrine in Poland. In 2015, Conklin had a vestment with the image prepared for Pope Francis and presented it to his assistant at the Vatican.

Conklin and the images go wherever the Holy Spirit takes them. She's confident that the call to prayer at abortion clinics will bear fruit. In the Old Testament, she explained, the Israelites carried the Ark of the Covenant around the city of Jericho until the walls came tumbling down. That gave her the idea for the first Jericho March at Planned Parenthood, with Mary, Ark of the New Covenant, prominently displayed.

"We prayed, we sang and we shouted, blowing the shofar, just as the Israelite army had done in days of old," she said.

The Jericho Marches are just one of the answers to her prayers for this ministry. "Lord, if you want this done," she says in her heart, "I know you will open a window."

For more information, visit: PreBornJesus.com.

Maryann Gogniat Eidemiller writes from Pennsylvania.

Courtesy photo