

(HISTORY)

# The ROSARY

## From a Pouch of Pebbles to a Chain of Prayers

Rosemary Kodger

**T**he history of our most popular nonliturgical prayer is not a familiar story. The rosary of the Blessed Virgin Mary as we know it today evolved slowly over many centuries.

The beginnings of its physical form can be traced back to ninth-century Ireland where monks living in monasteries sang the 150 psalms of the Bible every day. The faithful living nearby appreciated the beauty of this devotion. Their inability to read, however, prevented them from learning the psalms, and it became customary for them to recite 150 Paternosters (Our Fathers) instead. Because the prayer form was associated with the psalms, it was commonly known as a psalter.

It is almost certain that these early Christians used some device to help them keep count of their prayers. This device may have been as simple as collecting pebbles in a small pouch, then tossing one away for each prayer. The problem with this device was that new stones had to be collected before each recitation. Counting knots tied in a cord became common practice in the Middle Ages, and in time these cords were replaced with chains of beads, which became known as "paternosters." These prayer counters were often fashioned into objects of great beauty. Some beads were made of precious jewels, some of rare wood, some of carved stone. Many had great monetary value.

The rosary in its current form waited upon the formation of the Hail Mary. Originally this beloved prayer—a combination of the angel Gabriel's and Elizabeth's greetings to Mary—consisted of only four lines: "Hail Mary, full of grace. The Lord is with you. Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb." (See Lk 1:28; 1:42.) The repetition of this prayer became known as the Psalter of Mary, and the writings of Saint Peter Damian indicate that this was a popular repetitive prayer throughout Southern Europe in the eleventh century.

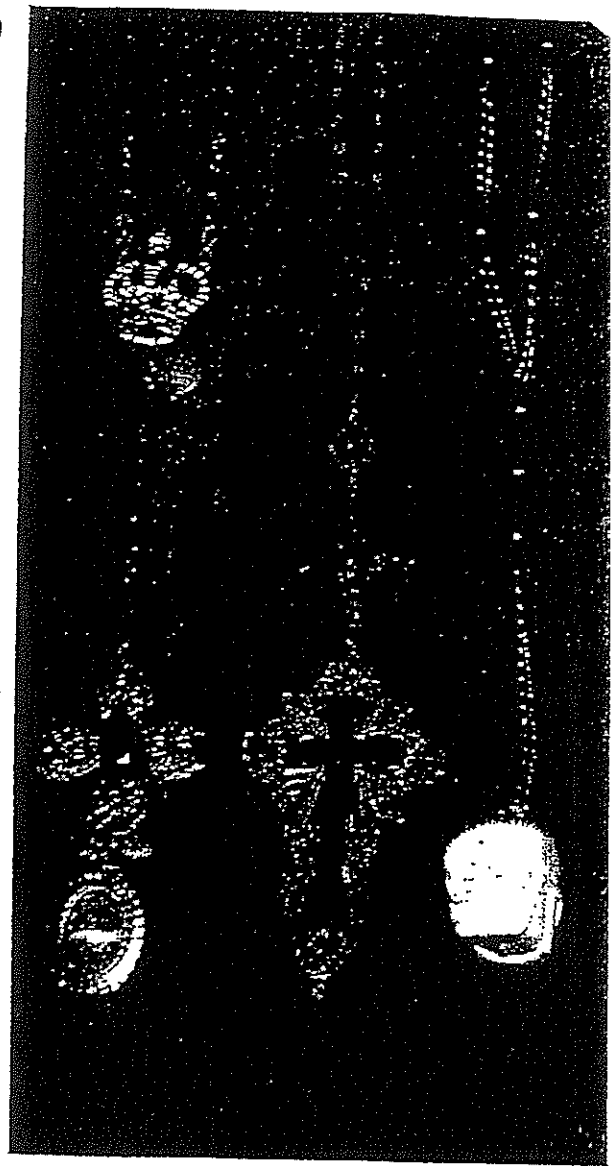
The first change to the Hail Mary came in the thirteenth century with the addition of the name *Jesus*, and the devotion and chain of beads became known as the Psalter of Jesus and Mary. It then became common to add a prayer of petition to the end of the Hail Mary, and numerous variations were used into the sixteenth century. The Catechism of the Council of Trent gives the now familiar wording of the end of the prayer: "Holy Mary, mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death. Amen." In 1568 the prayer in its present form was published in the Roman Breviary.

Recorded histories of the rosary become contradictory on its next development. Some historians credit

medieval Irish missionaries with having divided the 150 Paternosters into three parts of 50 each and assigning a meditation to each bead. Other versions credit Carthusian monks with dividing the Hail Marys into decades and adding a Paternoster between decades. Carthusians viewed the psalms as prophecies of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus and added them. This brought scriptural beauty to the devotion, and the rosary became a form of prayer that combined meditating on the lives of Jesus and Mary with physically fingering the beads.

In his book, *The Secrets*

*Rosary of the Mary*, a book published in 1573, shows the beads grouped as blossoms



A sample of rosaries from the Don Brown Rosary Collection at Columbia Gorge Interpretive Center, Stevenson, Washington (left to right): (1) chaplet of carved amber beads and gold cross inset with stones; (2) chaplet (c. 1770) of cut-glass beads and ebony inlaid cross; (3) skull of carved ivory replaces traditional cross; (4) chaplet of three decades composed of carved-ivory rabbits from China; (5) rosary carved from deer horns; (6) chaplet (c. 1730) of eight groups of eight glass beads.

that each decade be a remembrance of one event in the earthly life of her Son. The psalter was now a historical account of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. This version of the rosary has been a strength and blessing to Catholics ever since.

Repetitions of the Hail Mary have been known by many names, but by the fourteenth century the devotion had the name by which we know it today. Rosary comes from the Latin word *rosarium*, which was used originally to refer to a rose garden or a collection of writings. In the Middle Ages, however, it began to describe a collection of prayers, and it eventually came to refer only to a collection of prayers to Mary.

Around 1500 picture rosaries became popular. Woodcut prints could be produced that made the meditations of the rosary available to the generally illiterate populace. However, a print large enough for 150 pictures was unmanageable and expensive, so one picture was printed for each of the fifteen decades, with ten Marian thoughts printed on each picture. Gradually the Marian meditations were forgotten, and only the fifteen mysteries associated with the Our Fathers survived.

Also around 1500 it became common to add to the rosary the Apostles' Creed. The Glory Be to the Father was added in the sixteenth century, and its inclusion in the rosary became standard practice in the seventeenth century, bringing the ro-

sary to the form with which we are now familiar.

Although it is a nonliturgical prayer, the importance of the rosary was emphasized by Pope Pius V; in 1571 he declared that the rosary would be commemorated in the Mass for the first Sunday in October. Two years later Pope Gregory XIII established the Feast of the Most Holy Rosary, which at that time was to be celebrated only in churches with an altar dedicated to the rosary. Almost a century later, in 1671, observance of the feast was extended to all of Spain by Pope Clement X. Finally, in 1716 Pope Clement XI extended the feast of the rosary to the universal Church.

Prayed with meditation, the rosary is a valuable faith experience, a spiritual powerhouse. The steady, rhythmic repetition of Hail Marys becomes a background melody as our mind becomes involved with the vivid scriptural scenes.

Reliving events in the lives of Jesus and Mary as we pray the beads makes the devotion a mini-retreat. It increases the depth of our spiritual life and helps us to praise and glorify God. How could any devotion be more pleasing to God and to his Blessed Mother? Indeed, in several Church-approved apparitions—La Salette, Lourdes, and Fatima—Mary has enjoined us to pray the rosary.

Praying the rosary helps us to know Jesus and Mary and to know ourselves as well. It not only makes us aware of what God has done for us but challenges us to do something for God in return. ■

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Most Holy Virgin  
fished in Rome in  
medallions  
arms on a rose bush.

of the Rosary, Saint Louis de Montfort credits the Blessed Virgin herself with giving us the rosary as we know it today. He states that in 1214 Saint Dominic, upset by the sin in the world, withdrew into a forest. There he had fasted and prayed for three days and three nights when Mary appeared to him and said, "Preach my psalter," calling it the foundation stone of the New Testament. She urged Dominic to spread the devotion as a weapon with which to reform the world. She presented the plan of fifteen decades of the Hail Mary, each introduced with the Lord's Prayer. She asked

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