

# The Rosary

## A Prayer for All Seasons

By Gloria Hutchinson

Like an Olympic champion emerging from early retirement, the rosary has come back into its own as a prayer beloved by everyday Catholics. It had suffered a slow decline after Vatican Council II. Now, after celebrating the Year of the Rosary, we look back and celebrate this newly expanded and ever-reliable prayer for all seasons.

The reemergence of the rosary has been propelled by Pope John Paul II's apostolic letter *Rosarium Virginis Mariae (The Rosary of the Virgin Mary)* published in October 2002. The letter announced a Year of the Rosary and expressed the Holy Father's hope that the prayer would once again be embraced by families and all who seek the gift of peace.

In the letter's introduction, John Paul II emphasizes that though we pray for Mary's intercession, the rosary is truly about Jesus. It is "at heart a Christo-centric prayer" that can be seen as a compendium or short summary of the gospel. The first chapter then reflects on the theme of "Contemplating Christ with Mary."

As Chapter 2 begins, the unsuspecting reader has no idea that something new and groundbreaking is about to occur. With the skill of a preacher who rouses his congregation with a just-minted story, the Holy Father then introduces five new mysteries to be added to the traditional 15.

The effect on most Catholics, reading news summaries of the apostolic letter, was an enlivening mix of surprise, curiosity and a pleased

recognition that John Paul II was right on the mark. His proposed Luminous Mysteries (mysteries of light) would focus on Christ's public ministry between his baptism and his passion.

These five new mysteries would take their place between the joyful and the sorrowful mysteries, which focus respectively on Christ's childhood and on his suffering and death. "Why didn't I ever notice what was missing before?" people asked themselves.

The traditional 15 mysteries, including the glorious mysteries which follow the sorrowful, had become so familiar that few ever questioned whether the rosary might be incomplete as a Christ-centered prayer. However, once the proposed addition became known, a common response went something like this: "The rosary used to be like a biography that jumped from birth to death without an in-between. Now, we can stay with Jesus as he gathers his disciples and gets them ready for what's to come."



ILLUSTRATIONS BY JULIE LUBHEMAN

## Roots of the rosary

Before moving on to the revived rosary with its mysteries of light, we look back to the origins of this time-honored prayer. Where did it come from? When did it arise as a popular devotion? What is it about the rosary that has enabled it

Both St. Francis of Assisi and St. Ignatius were at various times accredited as the recipients of Our Lady's rosary. To stake their respective claims, members of these religious orders commissioned paintings of Mary passing the rosary to Francis or Ignatius.

Not to be outdone, the Dominicans convinced the pope to ban any art depict-

## The revival of a Gospel prayer

When Mary appeared to three children in Fatima at the turn of the last century, she identified herself as the Lady of the rosary. She impressed on the children how important it was to pray the rosary daily for world peace.

From that time until the mid-1960s, many Catholics took Mary at her word. If they did not pray the rosary with their families or in their parishes, they fingered their beads on the way to work or while waiting in airports. Even those who neglected to use the beads for their intended purpose often had rosaries dangling from their rearview mirrors or their bedposts, like portraits of Mother that are prominently displayed whether we are remembering to visit her or not.

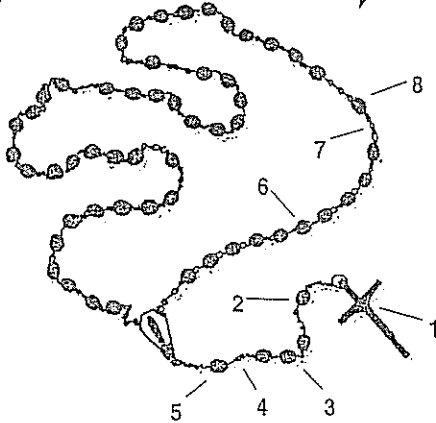
In the early 1960s, Vatican II realigned Catholic priorities in many areas, including the liturgy and the Scriptures. It had been a common practice among older people especially to pray the rosary during the Mass. Since the liturgy was then celebrated in Latin at an altar facing away from the people, the rosary was once again satisfying those who needed a simple form of prayer. They were not at ease with the missals that often ran parallel columns of Latin and English Mass texts.

To correct what had become for some an unbalanced devotion to Mary, the Church toned down its devotional practices honoring the Mother in order to refocus on the Son. In the intervening decades, the rosary receded from the forefront of many Catholics' prayer lives.

Now it is coming into its own once again with a reinforced recognition of its Gospel character. Each of the constituent prayers of the rosary (the Apostles' Creed, the Lord's Prayer, the Hail Mary, and the Glory Be) is rooted directly or indirectly in the Gospels. Whether Catholics are praying "Blessed are you among women" (Luke 1:42) or "He ascended into heaven" (Luke 24:51), their awareness of where these verses come from has been heightened by Bible study groups, now active in many parishes.

As a result, Mary's authentic importance in the Gospels and in the life of the Church has become more evident. Pope Paul VI in *Devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary* (1974) emphasized that all Christian piety should have a biblical imprint.

## How to Pray the Rosary



- 1 Make the Sign of the Cross and pray the Apostles' Creed.
- 2 Pray the Our Father.
- 3 Pray three Hail Marys.
- 4 Pray the Glory Be.
- 5 Announce the mystery for reflection and pray the Our Father.
- 6 Pray 10 Hail Marys.
- 7 Finish the decade with the Glory Be.
- 8 Repeat this process (5,6,7) for each decade.

to remain, over nine centuries, a prayer for all seasons?

The historical particulars are hard to pin down. But the custom of praying on a string of beads was already common in the 12th century. Anyone who has done so intuitively understands the tactile appeal of praying with the hands, as well as hearts and voices. Buddhists, Sikhs and Muslims had long used beads to count certain prayers that were repeated.

Christian monks ran beads or knotted string through their fingers as they chanted their required 150 psalms. Because these religious professionals prayed in Latin, the common folk could not chime in. Some resourcefully started praying 150 Our Fathers on the beads as their version of the monks' prayer.

Any account of how the rosary developed has to pause and make a respectful bow to St. Dominic (1170-1221) and the Order of Preachers, which he founded. Whether or not Dominic actually received the rosary from Mary during an apparition is unknown. However, he and his followers certainly propagated the prayer from the 13th century onward.

One measure of the prayer's early popularity is the jealous infighting among religious orders to claim it as their own.

ing anyone but their founder from receiving in his outstretched hands the coveted string of beads from Mary. Since that time, Dominic has remained the undisputed champion of the rosary, which was often called Our Lady's Psalter or Book of Psalms.

The rosary took its familiar form in the 16th century. Pope Pius V recommended that Catholics pray on their beads 150 Hail Marys in decades separated by an Our Father while reflecting on the life of Christ. Pius left his distinctive mark on the prayer by adding the second half of the Hail Mary to the biblical beginning (Luke 1:28,42).

Having endured the centuries with varying degrees of fidelity paid to it, the rosary has always been seen as a prayer of the people. It has been described as "a garland of roses" (the meaning of its name), "a string of pearls" (poet Robert Cameron Rogers) and "one harp that any hand can play" (poet Joyce Kilmer). Pope Paul VI even referred to the rosary as a Bible for those unable to read.

Praying the beads can be as simple as breathing, and as satisfying as holding a mother's hand. That simplicity may be reason enough to guarantee its survival until kingdom come.

He advised that devotion to Mary as "Mother and Associate of the Savior" should be permeated with "the great themes of the Christian message" as we find it in the Scriptures (#30). Paul VI called the attention of modern women to the reality that the Mary we hail in the Ave Maria was a dynamic, grace-filled woman who gave her "active and responsible consent" to the Incarnation. When she proclaimed her radical Magnificat, she announced God's vindication of the oppressed against the powerful and privileged of this world (#37).

Those who picture her as a passive woman uninvolved in the work of forging God's kingdom of justice and peace have not yet encountered the Mary of the Gospels. They have yet to reconcile their malleable Mary with the prophetic one who rejoices in the downfall of the mighty and the lifting up of the lowly.

And those who view her rosary as an outdated devotion for their pious elders are similarly off-base. Pope Leo XIII saw the rosary as "an effective spiritual weapon against the evils afflicting society" (RVM, #2). And John Paul II himself, hardly a home-bound pope uninvolved in critical global issues, calls it his favorite prayer.

These misconceptions will be short-lived as the teaching of John Paul II in his recent letter sinks into the minds and hearts of believers. His primary purpose in adding the five mysteries of light to the rosary was to make the prayer "more fully a compendium of the Gospel" (*Rosarium Virginis Mariae*, #21).

### Luminous Mysteries

The five new mysteries begin with the Baptism of Jesus (spotlighting his identity as God's beloved Son and his mission as the Messiah). The Baptism is followed by the Wedding at Cana (illuminating the first sign Jesus gave of his yet-to-be-revealed glory) and the Proclamation of the Kingdom (holding a bright candle to Jesus' saving work of healing and forgiveness).

These three mysteries are followed by the Transfiguration (the most luminous of the mysteries, in which Jesus' glory and divine nature shine) and the First Eucharist (enlightening our understanding of Jesus' self-gift to us at the Last Supper, as well as our identity as the one Body of Christ).

Although Mary remains in the background of four of the mysteries of light, she stands forth as an intercessor in the Wedding at Cana. Her words to the wine steward may be taken as her counsel to the Church in every season: "Do whatever he tells you" (John 2:5). As the Holy Father points out: "This counsel is a fitting introduction to the words and signs of Christ's public ministry and it forms the Marian foundation of all the 'mysteries of light'" (RVM, #21).

### Renewal of a Christ-centered prayer

The rosary is a Christ-centered prayer in which we pray to the Son in the company of his Mother. With Mary, we contemplate the face of Christ and the mysteries of the life he shared with her. Even in the words of the Hail Mary itself, it is 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'" (Luke 1:42; RVM, #19).

A clear focus on the life of Christ emerges as the mysteries of the rosary make the circle from joyful to luminous to sorrowful to glorious. Our fingers passing from one decade to the next make the journey with Jesus as he is conceived and born, as he teaches and heals, as he gives himself to us in forms of bread and wine, as he suffers and dies, rises and is glorified in the Church of our day.

Now that the mysteries spotlighting significant events in Christ's public ministry have been added, the circle is complete. Their presence gives fresh life to the traditional rosary and renews it as a prayer for the 21st century. The "sweet chain linking us to God," as Blessed Bartolo Longo (1841-1926) described the rosary, continues to give us much to ponder.

## The Mysteries of the Rosary

### Joyful Mysteries (Monday & Saturday)

- 1 The annunciation to Mary that she is to be Mother of the Savior (Luke 1:26-38)
- 2 The visitation of Mary to her cousin Elizabeth (Luke 1:39-45)
- 3 The nativity of our Lord Jesus Christ (Luke 2:1-7)
- 4 The presentation of the Infant Jesus in the Temple (Luke 2:22-38)
- 5 The finding of the Child Jesus in the Temple (Luke 2:41-52)

### Luminous Mysteries (Thursday)

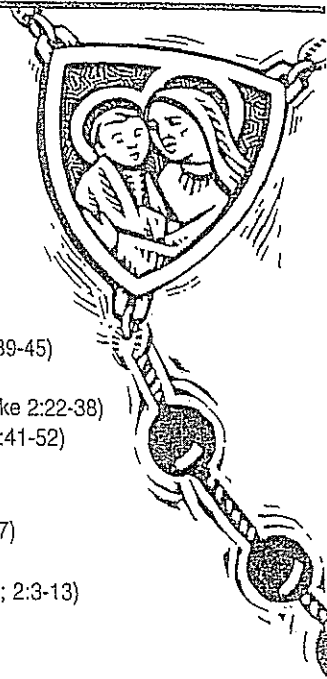
- 1 The baptism of Jesus in the Jordan (Matthew 3:13-17)
- 2 The wedding feast of Cana (John 2:1-12)
- 3 The proclamation of the Kingdom of God (Mark 1:15; 2:3-13)
- 4 The transfiguration of Jesus (Luke 9:28-36)
- 5 The first Eucharist (Matthew 26:26-30)

### Sorrowful Mysteries (Tuesday & Friday)

- 1 The agony of Christ in the garden (Mark 14:32-36)
- 2 The scourging of Jesus at the pillar (John 18:28-38; 19:1)
- 3 The crowning with thorns (Mark 15:16-20)
- 4 The carrying of the cross (Luke 23:26-32)
- 5 The crucifixion and death of Jesus (Luke 23:33-34; 39-46)

### Glorious Mysteries (Sunday & Wednesday)

- 1 The resurrection of Jesus (Luke 24:1-6)
- 2 The ascension of Jesus into heaven (Luke 24:50-53)
- 3 The coming of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:1-4)
- 4 The assumption of Mary into heaven (Song of Songs 2:8-14)
- 5 The coronation of Mary. (Revelation 12:1-6)



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# The Roses of Peace Prayer

THE TERM *ROSARY* initially referred to a circular enclosed garden, and later to a garland of roses. Since Mary is invoked as Mystical Rose in traditional litanies, Catholics find it easy to associate this beautiful, sweet-smelling and wonderfully enfolded flower with the woman we call Mother. When Mary appeared as Our Lady of Guadalupe to Juan Diego, she filled his tilma with roses in December. So the association seems to be as appealing to Mary as it is to those who honor her.

As we hold in our hands the strung roses of wood, glass, marble or plastic, the scent of peace arises. Like children caressing a smooth shell or a brilliant marble, we feel the quiet stirring of contentment. John Paul II reminds us, "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'" (Ephesians 2:4; *RVM*, #40).

The pope corrects those who would label the rosary an escape from the world's harsh realities. Instead, by focusing our awareness on Christ, the rosary opens our eyes to the necessity of being peacemakers and justice-doers according to his example.

## Prayer for all seasons

Three centuries ago St. Louis de Montfort wrote a devotional guide called *The Secret of the Rosary*. In it he advises readers that "each mystery reminds us of [Christ's] goodness to us in some specific way and it is by these mysteries that He has shown us His overwhelming love and desire for our salvation."

St. Louis knew from experience that when we pray the rosary in a contemplative way, Christ's goodness to us in each of the mysteries will come home to us. It is only when we are "out to lunch" via mental distraction that the mysteries march by without increasing our intimacy with him.

Like the Jesus Prayer and other ancient forms of meditation, the rosary is, as John Paul II says, "a path of contemplation." When the fingering of the beads is not accompanied by reflection on the mysteries, the rosary may readily slip into the realm of "babbling many words" against which Jesus warned us (Matthew 6:7).

How do we avoid the mindless repetition that sometimes gives the rosary a bad name? How can we learn from Mary the art of pondering all these things in our hearts? Why do we have such trouble entering into the quiet mulling of contemplative prayer?

Probably nobody put it better than Meister Eckhart. The 14th-century Dominican mystic wrote: "God is always ready but we are not ready. God is near to us but we are far from him. God is within; we are without. God is at home; we are abroad."

## Breathing life into your prayer

Here are a few simple suggestions about how to remain "at home" with God no matter where you're praying the rosary. As skiers do stretching exercises before hitting the slopes, take time to relax and breathe deeply from your diaphragm before beginning to pray. Imagine yourself breathing life into your prayer. Then ease into the prayer while remaining in touch with the steady rhythm of the Spirit breathing and praying in you.

As schoolchildren read one chapter a day, decide to reflect on one mystery at a time with the undivided attention usually reserved for loved ones who have been away too long. The same approach can be used for each of the consecutive four mysteries. You can get through an entire decade this way. Be patient with yourself if distractions come. Gently let them go and move back to the mystery at hand.

You may find it helpful to pray a mystery that connects most closely with your life at that particular time. For instance, when facing a difficult decision or wondering what direction God wants you to take, ponder the Baptism of the Lord. Connect with Jesus as he leaves his earlier life behind and emerges from the Jordan to do the work of the Beloved Son.

Or, when the comfort and predictability of your life are suddenly disrupted by some unexpected but demanding opportunity, ponder the Annunciation. Connect with Mary as the blessed disturbance of

Gabriel's message—and her daring "Yes"—turn her young life upside down and sideways.

More important than any suggestions, tools or techniques for praying the rosary is the conviction that God treasures each word, each thought, each quiet pondering in which our hearts are invested. And the more practiced we become at staying "at home" with our loving God, the more meaningful the rosary will become in our daily lives. ☒

*Gloria Hutchinson is a former teacher and catechist who writes extensively on the spiritual life. Her books include Praying the Rosary, A Retreat With Gerard Manley Hopkins and Hildegard of Bingen and Praying the Way: Reflections on the Stations of the Cross, all by St. Anthony Messenger Press.*

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