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HISTORY OF THE ROSARY

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Until the early part of the seventeenth century, it was widely believed that Saint Dominic, the founder of the Order of Preachers (commonly known as the Dominican Order) received the rosary from the Blessed Virgin Mary herself. Although many present-day devotional paintings, pictures, calendars, and altar pieces still attest to this belief, historians generally agree that the rosary, as a form of prayer, is a product of centuries of evolution which began long before the time of Saint Dominic.

What the world owes to Saint Dominic and the Dominicans is not the rosary as a formula for praying, but as a devotion with lingering popularity and as an instrument of preaching the Catholic faith. Biographers of Saint Dominic (1170-1221) are one in saying that he had a great love for the Blessed Mother. His preaching was interspersed with Marian invocations and meditations on the mysteries of Jesus. Many Dominicans after him formed confraternities of lay people whose devout and regular recitation of *Hail Marys* closely resembled the present-day communal recitation of the rosary. Richard Gribble, a Holy Cross priest, writes: "It would *not* be *inaccurate* to call the Dominicans the principal promoters and defenders of the rosary through history."

The evolution of the rosary is rooted in every believer's desire to link oneself with the Divine. Prayer is at the heart of every religion.

Whether ritualized or spontaneous, communal or individual, vocal or mental, prayer serves as an effective link between the human person and the Divine. Through it, a believer not only expresses praise, worship, supplication, reparation, or intercession, but also an insatiable thirst to pierce through the sublime mystery of the Divine. Since the mystery remains impenetrable, the repetition of prayers becomes necessary. The repetition is like a persistent "knocking at the door" of meaning and understanding. Authentic prayer occurs when understanding, however imperfect, somehow grasps the meaning of the Divine, delighting in it in an overpowering moment of mystical communion.

Saint Paul urges the Christians of first century Thessalonica to "pray without ceasing" (1 Thess. 5:1). In his letter to Rome, the Apostle instructs the Christian community there to "be constant in prayer" (Rom. 12:12). He not only demands unceasing prayer of the Christians in his care, but practices it himself as well. In his letter to the Thessalonian community, he writes, "We constantly thank God for you," (1 Thess. 2:13) and he comforts Timothy, his "true child in the faith" (1 Tim. 1:2) with the words "Always I remember you in my prayers" (2 Tim. 1:3). In fact, whenever Saint Paul speaks of prayer in his letters, two Greek words repeatedly appear: *pantote,* which means *always,* and *adialeptos,* meaning *without interruption* or *unceasingly.* Prayer is then not merely a part of life which one can conveniently lay aside if something deemed more important comes up; *prayer is all of life.* Prayer is essential to life as is breathing.

This raises some important questions. How can anyone be expected to pray all the time? People are very busy. Work, family, children, and school all place heavy demands upon available time. How can anyone fit more time for prayer into an already overcrowded life? These questions and many others like them which could be asked set up a false dichotomy in the Christian life. To pray does not mean to think about God in contrast to thinking about other things or to spend time with God in contrast to spending time with family and friends. Rather, *to pray means to think and live one's entire life in the Presence of God.* Prayer formulas, like the Rosary, are ways of enkindling this awareness.

Prefigurations of the Rosary

Spontaneous or ritualized prayer formulas repeated incessantly have been characteristic of world religions like Hinduism, Buddhism, and even Islam. Prayer counters such as rocks, sticks, notches in wood, and even knots and beads, were used to keep track of the number of prayers uttered. The idea of using a string of beads to facilitate prayer and meditation is not exclusive to Christianity.

As early as the nineteenth century B.C., Hindus were already using prayer beads in worshipping their gods. Today, devotees of Shiva use a rosary of 32 or 64 beads, while those who worship Vishnu use a prayer counter of 108 beads. In contemporary Korea, Buddhists use a rosary of 110 beads, while Japanese Buddhists use a very complex rosary that requires them to recite over 36,000 prayers. Two hundred years after the death of the prophet Muhammad, Muslims pray using 99 beads, each one corresponding to a name and attribute of Allah. Christianity is perhaps the last world religion to use a rosary in its worship. How did this come about?

Before the psalms in the Old Testament became the main body of the liturgical prayer of the Church, there were formulas or invocations that Christians uttered repeatedly. The early Christian monks who went out into the desert to live and pray in the second through the fourth centuries had a preference for short, repetitious prayer ("monological prayer"). The Orthodox Church has looked to these Desert Fathers as a major source of spiritual wisdom. A favorite repetitious prayer of these monks was *Kyrie eleison* ("Lord, have mercy"). By the sixth century, the statement of the tax collector in Lk. 18:13 became the basis of the prayer "God, have pity on me, a sinner." This later evolved into what is now known as the *Jesus Prayer:* "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have pity on me, a sinner." It was hoped that a Christian could move from vocal prayer to meditation and finally to contemplation by repeating this invocation. Also called the *Prayer of the Heart,* the Jesus Prayer disposes the Christian to pray as regularly as the heartbeat.

Our Father. With the establishment of monasteries, monks

and nuns recited the 150 psalms in the Old Testament as an essential element of their religious obligation (the *Divine Office*). Aside from being scriptural, the psalms are beautiful songs of worship, repentance, thanksgiving, and supplication—the four aspects of authentic prayer. Later, the daily recitation of the Psalms became the focal point within which the daily life of monks and nuns revolved. They would practically recite the entire 150 psalms every single day, distributed equally among their dawn, morning, midday, and evening prayer schedule.

This arrangement was good for the monks and nuns, and later for the clergy, but the laity was greatly disadvantaged by it. Majority of the laity could hardly read, and they did not have copies of the Bible. Shortly after the beginning of the twelfth century, lay people (in Ireland, some historians say), found a way of participating in the *Divine Office* that was performed in monasteries and convents by reciting the Lord's Prayer *(Pater Noster)* 150 times, lifted verbatim from the Gospel of Matthew. They would count their *Pater Nosters* by using pebbles. This practice became so popular that instead of pebbles, the laity would get a large rope and tie 150 knots in it. Every knot corresponded with one *Pater Noster.* This long rope was later shortened to one with 50 knots, which they used three times a day. It can be said that the first form of the Rosary appeared as the recitation of the 150 *Pater Nosters*, also called the *Psalter of Jesus.*

Hail Mary. Toward the end of the twelfth century, the invocation "Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee, blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb" took on an importance equal to that of the *Pater Noster.* This Marian invocation, taken from Lk. 1:28 and Lk. 1:42, is a combination of the greeting to Mary by the angel Gabriel and Elizabeth's exultant salutation to Mary. In 1198, the *Hail Mary* was listed, along with the Apostles' Creed and the *Pater Noster,* as official Church prayer. The importance given to the *Hail Mary* logically arose from the Church's affirmation of the Blessed Mother's crucial role in the life and mission of Jesus. The 150 *Hail Marys* which soon took the place of the 150 *Pater Nosters*–which, in turn, were used in place of the 150 psalms–constituted what was called "Mary's Psalter." The name Jesus was believed to have been added

to the *Hail Mary* as early as 1261 by Pope Urban IV, but the addition came into popular usage only 200 years later.

Holy Mary. The phrase "Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death. Amen" was believed to have been added to the Rosary during the sixteenth century. This phrase, however, was first used in the document of the Council of Ephesus (431), which defined as a dogma of faith *Mary as the Mother of God (Theotokos).* In 1495, the Dominican reformer Girolamo Savoranola wrote in a preface for one of his numerous writings an invocation that is practically the same as the modern prayer: *"Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death. Amen."* Finally, in the Catechism issued by the Council of Trent in the first half of the sixteenth century, the definitive form of the invocation was fixed. It went as such: *"Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death. Amen."* In 1568, the complete prayer, *"Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee, blessed art thou amongst women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death. Amen,"* came with the publication of the Roman Breviary.

Glory Be. The doxology *"Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit..."* recited at the conclusion of each decade of the Rosary originated from the popular Jewish doxology *"God be praised!"* From the third century, the doxology was used to conclude the recitation of each of the 150 psalms, both in the Western and Eastern Catholic Churches. In 529, the Second Council of Vaison declared that all territories beyond the Alps must pray the doxology in this way: *"Glory be to the Father and to the Son and the Holy Ghost, as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen."* History has shown, however, that the doxology was never officially included among the Rosary prayers. In fact, as late as 1882, when Pope Leo XIII issued his first encyclical on the Rosary, he never mentioned the *Glory be.* Nor did Pius XI mention it in his encyclical published in 1937. Regardless of these facts, the doxology became a popular part of the recitation of the Rosary.

Creed and *Salve Regina*. The praying of the Creed as part of

the Rosary was first mentioned in a book entitled *Libellus Perutilis,* published in 1495. The author of this work suggested that the *Hail Marys,* together with the *Pater Noster* formed, as it were, a garland of flowers connected around a hoop which is the *Creed.* The most celebrated Marian hymn, the *Salve Regina,* became a popular prayer throughout the Latin Church. In the twelfth century, it was used as an antiphon during the recitation or chanting of Mary's *Magnificat* and as a processional chant among many monastic and religious orders. By the seventeenth century and through popular practice, this beautiful hymn, containing many relevant medieval themes and titles of the Blessed Mother, capped the recitation of the Rosary.

"O my Jesus ..." By popular practice, this short invocation is now said between each mystery of the Rosary. At Fatima, on June 13, 1917, in one of the apparitions of Our Lady to Lucia, Jacinta, and Francisco, she instructed them to "Say the Rosary, inserting between the mysteries the following prayer: 'O my Jesus, forgive us. Save us from the fires of hell. Lead all souls into Heaven, especially those who are in most need'." At Lourdes, Mary had appeared to Bernadette Soubiros with a rosary wrapped in her hands, but her message to Bernadette did not mention the Rosary. At Fatima, however, the Blessed Virgin acknowledged herself as the Lady of the Rosary. Her message was simple and direct: "Pray the Rosary each day for world peace."

The Mysteries: *Rosaria*

The essence of the Rosary devotion, however, lies not in the mere recitation of the various prayers included in it. The central focus of this devotion is the meditation on the mysteries in the life of Jesus, and Mary's unique role in His life and mission.

In the early fifteenth century, a Carthusian monk, Dominic of Prussia, developed a way of reciting the Rosary with 50 *Hail Marys* and linked these with 50 meditative phrases about Jesus and Mary. These meditative phrases (called *clausulae*) were actually brief summaries of some aspects of the life and work of Jesus. These phrases would later be known as the mysteries of the Rosary. Originally, 14 dealt with the

hidden life of Jesus, 6 dealt with His public life, 22 were about His passion, and 8 dealt with the glorification of Jesus and the coronation of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

It was also in this century that the word *Rosarium* (rose garden) was applied to the recitation of the 50 *Hail Marys.* At about the same time, another Carthusian, Henry Kalkar, contributed further to the development of the Rosary by dividing the 50 *Hail Marys* into groups of ten, forming five decades with a *Pater Noster* before each decade.

At the latter part of the fifteenth century, the 50 mysteries had been reduced to 15 mysteries, one for each decade of the *Hail Marys.* In 1470, the Dominican Alan de la Roche (Alan de Rupe) founded the *Confraternity of the Psalter of Jesus and Mary* (which later evolved into the *Confraternity of the Holy Rosary*), contributing enormously to the Rosary's popularity. In 1483, a book about the Rosary entitled *Our Dear Lady's Psalter* was written by a Dominican in which he enumerated the 15 mysteries of the Rosary, which are the same as the modern-day mysteries except for the final two glorious mysteries. In the version of this anonymous Dominican, the fourth glorious mystery is the Assumption and Coronation of Mary, while the fifth mystery is the Last Judgement. In 1573, another Dominican set the typical division of the mysteries into the joyful, sorrowful and glorious.

In 1569, Pope Saint Pius V definitively fixed the formula for praying the Rosary, taking into consideration the many modifications through history. He also officially affirmed the Rosary as an efficacious individual and communal prayer, and assured its many devotees graces and indulgences. Pope Gregory XIII established in 1571 the feast of the Holy Rosary, celebrated every October 7. The concluding prayer of the Rosary is taken from the Mass for this Feast: *"In meditating on the mysteries of the Rosary, we ask that we may imitate what they contain and obtain what they promise through Christ our Lord."*

Popes and the Rosary

The universal appeal of the Rosary among the faithful and their

spontaneous attachment to it are proof that the Blessed Mother always has a place in the hearts of the faithful. It is interesting to note that the Rosary was born out of the simple Catholics' desire to participate in the official prayer of the Church. The phenomenal popularity and persistence of this devotion is an instance of the *sensus fidei,* a proof that the Holy Spirit works among the faithful in ways that the official teaching office of the Church—and those who hold it—cannot always anticipate.

To their credit, many popes were not wanting in showing support for the propagation of the Rosary. Among the notable ones were Popes Leo X, Gregory XII, Sixtus V, Clement VII, Alexander VII, Blessed Innocent XI, Clement XI, Innocent XIII, and Pope Benedict XIV. In the nineteenth century, the golden season of the Rosary began with Leo XIII, rightly called the *Pope of the Rosary.* He issued numerous documents in praise of this devotion and urged the formation of what he called an "army of contemplatives" who would recite this prayer daily as a weapon against society's evils. Probably the most significant comment on the Rosary made by a modern-day pope came from Pius XII. He stressed the inseparable link between the Rosary and the family. For him, the Rosary is a family prayer, "a most efficacious means to transform the family into an earthly abode of sanctity, a sacred temple, a school of Christian discipline and Christian virtue."

Following Pius XII's lead, Father Patrick Peyton, a Holy Cross priest internationally known as *The Rosary Priest,* popularized the saying "The family that prays together, stays together."

The apparitions of Our Lady and the numerous victories of Christian armies and naval fleets against their enemies also gave impetus to the official Church's support of the Rosary. In all of these special events, Mary asked all Christians to pray the Rosary as a sure way to obtain peace and combat the devastating effects of materialism and false ideologies.

A Logic of Love

Pope Pius XI in his encyclical letter on September 20, 1937,

described the Rosary as a prayer governed by "a logic of love." He wrote that it is characteristic of those in love to repeat many, many times the same words of affection to their beloved. Yet such repetitions are not futile or vicious because, to both the lover and the beloved, the same words always express something new and life-giving.

Pope Paul VI, in his apostolic exhortation *Marialis Cultus,* promulgated on February 2, 1974, calls the Rosary "a compendium of the Gospel" and a Gospel prayer. Despite this magisterial support for the Rosary, many lay faithful, theologians, religious, and even seminarians, perhaps influenced by the prevailing skepticism and liberalism of the post-Vatican II period, looked at the Rosary as a pious practice that has outlived its usefulness. Beginning in the West, the communal recitation of the Rosary gradually disappeared in the prayer schedule of many convents and religious houses. The tradition of praying the Rosary in the family also suffered because of the hectic pace of modern living, the preponderance of communication, information, and entertainment media, and the unmitigated upsurge of materialism and secularism.

A vibrant hope for the future of the Rosary was born on October 16, 2002, when Pope John Paul II issued the document *Rosarium Virginis Mariae,* the apostolic letter which he considers as the Marian crowning of his other significant apostolic letter, *Novo millennio ineunte.* Focusing on the Christological dimension of the prayer and contemplating what has long been lacking in the meditation on the life of Christ, the Pope added the *Mysteries of Light,* five mysteries corresponding to the public life of Jesus; he stressed that the Rosary remains, as ever, an important instrument for evangelization. He also reminds all Catholics that the Rosary is an effective tool for ecumenism and promoting world peace. The pope writes: "The Rosary is, by its nature, a prayer for peace, since it consists in the contemplation of Christ, the giver of Peace."

References: Gribble, Richard. *The History and Devotion of the Rosary.* Huntington, Indiana: Our Sunday Visitor, 1992; Fuertes, Miguel Angel. *El Rosario, Oracion de ayer y de hoy.* Salamanca: Editorial San Esteban, 1993.