

The Holy Rosary of the Blessed Virgin Mary

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This talk is entitled THE HOLY ROSARY OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY. I will comment on the importance of the Rosary as prayer and devotion in the life of a Catholic in the context of the Apostolic Letter **Rosarium Virginis Mariae** written by Pope St. John Paul II. To begin I would like first to review some things about prayer and the nature of devotion.

What is prayer?

Prayer is turning toward God. When a person prays, he enters into a living relationship with God (cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 2558-2565).

Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI says this: “Man bears within him a thirst for the infinite, a longing for eternity, a quest for beauty, a desire for love, a need for light and truth which impel him towards the Absolute; man bears within himself the desire for God. And man knows, in a certain way, that he can turn to God; he knows that he can pray to him” (Benedict XVI, *A School of Prayer*).

Thus, the reason why we pray shines with greater lucidity.

The more we pray... the better our relationship with God will be; the more we will think about God; the closer we will feel to God; the more we will want to spend time with God; and the more we will want to do what God wants us to do.

We turn now briefly to devotion. The dictionary defines devotion as “a strong attachment or affection, as to a person or cause; zeal or ardor in the performance of religious duties or acts;

the fact, quality, or state of giving up or applying oneself or one’s time, energy, etc. to some purpose, activity, or person” (*Webster’s New World Dictionary, College Edition*, 1953).

One of the most important devotions we have in the Catholic Church is literally at our fingertips. This devotion is the Holy Rosary of the Virgin Mary. Several Popes beginning with Leo XIII to the present have extolled this wonderful devotion two of whom I quote here.

Newly canonized Pope St. John XXIII (reigning as pope from 1958-1963), in an encyclical entitled *Grata recordatio*, to all the Bishops, writes these words, “These pleasant memories of Our younger days have not faded or vanished as the years of Our life have passed. On the contrary, We want to declare in complete frankness and simplicity that the years have made Mary’s rosary all the dearer to Us. We never fail to recite it each day in its entirety...” (Oligny, *The Rosary Papal Teachings*).

Ven. (soon to be beatified) Paul V who was pope from 1963-1978, pens these words to the children of the Living Rosary: “Your rosary is a ladder which you climb together very quietly to meet the Madonna, that is to say, Jesus. Because that is also one of the characteristics of the rosary, the most important and the most beautiful of all: the rosary is a devotion, which, through the Blessed Mother, leads us to Jesus Christ. It is He who is the goal of this long and repeated invocation to Mary. We speak to Mary to come to Jesus. She brought Him into

the world; she is the Mother of Jesus; she presents us to Him if we are devoted to her” (Oligny, *The Rosary Papal Teachings*).

These popes recognized the necessity and vitality of this devotion and so did our beloved, recently canonized Pope St. John Paul II, who being pope from 1978-2005 makes him the third longest reigning pope in the history of the Church.

As you may recall, this great pope declared a year to be set aside for the Holy Rosary. It was in that year, October 2002 to October 2003 that he promulgated this apostolic letter on the Rosary, which he addressed to the bishops, clergy and faithful of the Church.

This document, as every papal document, consists of an introduction, a conclusion, and several chapters. Within each section, there are subheadings. Under the subheading is an article number, which contains several paragraphs. This particular apostolic letter has 3 chapters and 43 articles.

The letter begins with the Introduction. In the first two paragraphs of article 1, he explains that the rosary is prayer centered on Christ in which with Mary the Christian people are “led to contemplate the beauty on the face of Christ and to experience the depths of his love.” He calls it “the school of Mary” because it is by praying with Mary that we come to discover who Jesus is (John Paul, *Rosarium Virginis Mariae*).

He recognizes three of his predecessors who gave great importance to the Rosary. One of them, Pope Leo XIII, receives a special note because of the Encyclical *Supremi Apostolatus Officio*, which he promulgated on September 1, 1883. In this document, which was the first of

his many writings about the rosary, he put the Rosary forward as an effective weapon against the evils troubling society. The other two Popes to whom I have already referred St. John XXIII and Pope Ven. Paul VI both from the time of the Second Vatican Council made the topic of the Rosary important in their pontificates. Manifesting his own esteem for this prayer John Paul states: “I myself have often encouraged the frequent recitation of the Rosary. From my youthful years, this prayer has held an important place in my spiritual life...in moments of joy and in moments of difficulty. To it I have entrusted any number of concerns; in it I have always found comfort....” (John Paul, 2).

He continues the introduction, addressing several contentions of why some reject the Rosary. One such consideration is the fear of the Rosary being too unecumenical, somehow exclusive to our brethren in Christ who may find objection to the prayer’s distinctly Marian character. However, as the Second Vatican Council described the proper veneration of the Mother of God, it is clear that the Rosary is not in the least manner an obstacle to ecumenism. In fact, the Rosary properly understood serves as a help to moving us closer together as one in the faith given to us by Christ.

The most important consideration the Pope gives to praying the Rosary is that it is a path, a way of contemplating the Christian mystery so that believers availing themselves to this prayer are trained in holiness. Explaining that this prayer is for the entire Church he says: “Developed in the West, it is a typically meditative prayer, corresponding in some way to the ‘prayer of the heart’ or ‘Jesus prayer’ which took place in the soil of the Christian East” (John Paul, 5).

The Pope also asserts our need to bring about a revival of praying the Rosary for two critical problems our world faces today: for peace in a global society torn by violence of every kind and for the family whose very existence is greatly threatened.

Our Blessed Mother still wants to help us through this prayer. We have only to think of her apparitions at Lourdes and Fatima whose shrines continue to receive numerous pilgrims where they come to be renewed and to seek her maternal care. As we look now at these chapters, we will discover a treasure into which we can always dig deeper and deeper.

Chapter One Contemplating Christ with Mary

In order for us to see the face of Christ John Paul II reminds us that we must look to His Mother. Mary knows Him as no other has or will know Him. He took form in her womb. From her Jesus received His human nature. Having conceived Him by the power of the Holy Spirit at the Annunciation, she carried Him nine months until His birth in Bethlehem. At His birth, the gaze of Mary, turned to her Son from the moment of His conception, fell with immense tenderness on the face of this little baby who was God in the flesh. From that time onward, her gaze would never leave Him. Her eyes as her heart fixed on her Son. Mary lived with her entire being riveted on Christ. Nothing of Him was lost to her. "She kept all these things and pondered them in her heart" (*Luke 2:19*).

Because the Rosary from the onset begins with Mary's encounters with God, this prayer becomes a precious contemplative prayer. To

show that the Rosary is truly a form of contemplation centered on Christ, John Paul brings out certain aspects.

He points out that when we look at Mary's life of contemplation, we see that her life is one of remembering. This word, understood in the biblical sense, is a making present the saving events that God brought about in the history of man's salvation. We experience that to come to know Christ is not simply learning about Him and what He taught; we must come to *learn Him* and there is no better teacher than Mary His Mother, who shows us by her example how we are to listen and respond to the Holy Spirit working within our lives. The Rosary gives us a way of becoming fully conformed to Christ so that as His disciples our conduct may be increasingly shaped in accordance with His manner of thinking and being (John Paul, 14).

Mary also intervenes for us with her maternal concern. When we are at a loss of how to pray or we do not seem to have our prayers answered, we can go to the Mother of God in the Rosary confident that "her maternal intercession can obtain all things from the heart of her Son" (John Paul, 16).

Chapter Two Mysteries of Christ – Mysteries of His Mother

The Rosary is a "compendium of the Gospel" which is to say that it is centered on the Gospel, the Good News of Jesus Himself. John Paul II, quoting Paul VI writes: "As a Gospel prayer, centered on the mystery of the redemptive Incarnation, the Rosary is a prayer with a clearly Christological orientation. Its most characteristic element, in fact, the litany-like

succession of Hail Marys, becomes in itself an unceasing praise of Christ ...”(John Paul, 18).

Elaborating on each set of the mysteries, the Joyful, the Luminous, the Sorrowful, and the Glorious, the Pope gives a beautiful explanation of each. He indicates how the Joyful Mysteries are lived in a climate of joy beginning with the Annunciation with Gabriel’s greeting to the Virgin: “Rejoice, Mary”. As she readily gives her fiat and thus becomes the Mother of the Son of the Heavenly Father who desires to unite all things in Christ, “then the whole of the universe is in some way touched by the divine favor” and is embraced by her ‘yes’ to the will of God (John Paul, 20).

The exultation, the gladness, the joy continues in the Visitation as Mary comes to Elizabeth and upon hearing the Virgin’s voice, the babe in Elizabeth’s womb leaps for joy. This extends too to Bethlehem when the shepherd’s receive the news of great joy that the Savior of the world is born.

In the last two mysteries, this joy is touched with a sense of foreboding. Even in the midst of the joy of the Child’s consecration and the ecstasy of the aged Simeon, there is the prophecy to Mary that a sword will pierce her heart. Then when the parents find the twelve-year-old Child in the Temple teaching, the revelation that He is wholly dedicated to His Father’s business in establishing the Kingdom leaves them not understanding His words. So says John Paul that when we meditate on the Joyful Mysteries we “enter into the ultimate causes and the deepest meaning of Christian joy” (John Paul, 20).

From the infancy of Christ and His life as a boy, we move to the five Luminous Mysteries that

the Pope proposes as an addition to the traditional set of fifteen mysteries. Although he states that the whole mystery of Christ is a mystery of light, he singles out five, which significantly show Christ as the light of the world. These mysteries reveal “the Kingdom now present in the very person of Jesus”: (1) His Baptism in the Jordan, (2) His self-manifestation at the wedding of Cana, (3) His proclamation of the Kingdom of God, with His call to conversion, (4) His Transfiguration, and finally, (5) His institution of the Eucharist, as the sacramental expression of the Paschal Mystery.

Expounding beautifully on each one and their individual significance on how the light of Christ shines out in His public ministry, the Pope then writes two paragraphs on the Sorrowful Mysteries, which bring us to encounter particular moments of Christ’s Passion and Death. Here we see not only the love that God has for man but also “the meaning of man himself” (John Paul, 21).

Making reference to the phrase *Ecce homo* (Latin for “Here is the Man”) the Pope writes: “...the meaning, origin and fulfillment of man is to be found in Christ, the God who humbles Himself out of love “even unto death, death on a cross” (Phil 2:8). The sorrowful mysteries help the believer to relive the death of Jesus, to stand at the foot of the Cross beside Mary, to enter with her into the depths of God’s love for man and to experience all its life-giving power” (John Paul, 22).

Nevertheless, what would the sorrowful mysteries be for us if there were no triumph of the Resurrection? The Glorious Mysteries thus lead us to anticipate Heaven in all its glory. Contemplating the face of Christ in His Resurrection, we experience the reasons for our

own faith as well as that of Mary's joy, because she more than likely had an incredibly intense experience of her glorified Son and Savior although it is not recorded in Scripture. Mary's own resurrection anticipated in the Ascension of Christ, when the Father raises up His humanity in glory, comes to fruition in the Assumption. In the Assumption, Mary is taken up body and soul into the same glory as her Son. Made Queen of the Angels and the Saints in the final mystery, she shines forth in radiant beauty, "the anticipation and the supreme realization of the eschatological state of the Church" (John Paul, 23).

The third glorious mystery, the sending of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, remains in the center of these glorious events. Here the Church, a family gathered together with Mary, receives the power of the Holy Spirit to bring the Good News of Christ to the ends of the world. Heaven begins here and now. "The glorious mysteries thus lead the faithful to a greater hope for the eschatological goal towards which they journey as members of the pilgrim People of God in history. This can only impel them to bear courageous witness to that 'good news' which gives meaning to their entire existence" (John Paul, 23).

As we stay close to Mary in the mysteries, we come to know Christ in an inward and profound manner. She whose life is a deep intimate experience of one who lives from Christ and through Him brings us into her lived experience that the Pope calls "Mary's way" through the mysteries of the Rosary and our praying the Hail Mary. (John Paul, 24).

Chapter III
"For Me, To Live Is Christ"

The method of praying the Rosary in which we can make the mysteries of Christ our own is one of repetition, especially that of the Hail Mary repeated ten times in each mystery. If we do not allow this repetition to sustain our attention on the One who is loved, we may be tempted to see the Rosary as dry and boring. Just as Jesus elicited Peter's response of love after the Resurrection with a triple repetition, so we do the same whenever the Hail Mary is repeatedly on our lips. Although the Hail Mary is addressed to Mary, the act of love is directed to Jesus with and through her.

The Pope, in explaining the validity of the use of the Rosary shows how Christian spirituality engages the entire person, spirit, soul and body. We see this particularly in the Liturgy with sacraments and sacramentals. Since God communicates with us in this manner, it only makes sense that we would make use of something similar in our relationship with Christ.

Recognizing that desire for meditation is leading some Christians into other religions due to their limited knowledge of the Christian contemplative tradition the Pope states "...among these approaches are methods aimed at attaining a high level of spiritual concentration by using techniques of a psychophysical, repetitive and symbolic nature. The Rosary is situated within this broad gamut of religious phenomena, but it is distinguished by characteristics of its own which correspond to specifically Christian requirements" (John Paul, 28).

The Rosary, as a method of contemplation, is not an end in itself. In other words, it is a means by which we can deepen our relationship with Christ. As a means to that goal, it has

stood the test of centuries of experience in the lives of numerous saints and therefore cannot be undervalued. However, that is not to say that the method itself is beyond enhancement. This then is what the Holy Father attempts to do with the introduction of the Luminous Mysteries and the few suggestions that follow.

He looks at the way in which we pray the Rosary beginning with the announcing of the mysteries. In order for us to focus our attention on each mystery, it is helpful to have a picture in our minds. Announcing the mystery and having an image or picture to create the scene easily accomplishes this purpose.

To further aid in the prayer, the use of a passage from Scripture brings us more readily into dialogue with God as we listen to His Word.

In order that this listening and meditation bear fruit, silence is essential for us to concentrate on the mystery being prayed.

Once we have drawn ourselves into the mystery after a short period of silence, the “Our Father” draws us to the Father in Heaven and our prayer becomes not merely our personal relationship with Him but with the entire Church.

The ten Hail Marys that follow make the Rosary the Marian prayer. In the repetition, we share in the wonder and amazement as Mary says ‘yes’ to God and God takes flesh in her womb. The emphasis in the prayer is the name “Jesus” that connects the first part (the Annunciation and the Visitation scenes) with the second part (the invocation of the Church for her present maternal care and at the hour of our death).

Because all prayer is Trinitarian- through Christ, to the Father, in the Holy Spirit- the Glory Be at the end of each decade should have due prominence as the goal of Christian contemplation.

At the conclusion of each mystery, he proposes a prayer for a specific virtue as a fruit of that mystery in hopes to better express the connection with Christian life.

From the actual method, he turns to the material aid that we use for praying the Rosary, namely the beads themselves. Observing that the beads that comprise the Rosary can have a more profound meaning so as to deepen our experience of prayer: “Here the first thing to note is the way the beads converge upon the Crucifix, which both opens and closes the unfolding sequence of prayer. The life and prayer of believers is centered upon Christ. Everything begins from Him, everything leads towards Him, everything, through Him, in the Holy Spirit, attains to the Father” (John Paul, 36).

In the last part of the chapter, the Pope reflects on the different ways to begin the Rosary and pronounces those customs permissible as long as they prepare the mind for contemplation. The ending of the prayer includes intentions for the Pope so as “to embrace all the needs of the Church”. The crown of the Rosary is the Salve Regina (Hail Holy Queen) or the Litany of Loreto (John Paul, 37).

Regarding the actual praying of the Rosary, the Pope says that the entire Rosary, all twenty mysteries can be prayed daily or just a part of the Rosary (normally five mysteries as is popular practice) for particular days of the week. He emphasizes, “What is really

important is that the Rosary should always be seen and experienced as a path of contemplation” (John Paul, 38).

In his concluding statements, the Pope once more urges the praying of the Rosary for specifically peace in the world and the family. For peace: “In a word, by focusing our eyes on Christ, the Rosary also makes us peacemakers in the world...the Rosary allows us to hope that, even today, the difficult ‘battle’ for peace can be won” (John Paul, 40).

Speaking of the many problems that face the family in our modern age especially in the area of communicating the Pope states, “Families seldom manage to come together, and the rare occasions when they do are often taken up with watching television.” (We could add internet,

iPod, computer, etc.) “To return to the recitation of the family Rosary means filling daily life with very different images, images of the mystery of salvation: the image of the Redeemer, the image of His most Blessed Mother. ...” (John Paul, 41).

John Paul ends this Apostolic Letter, as he always does, by entrusting it into the hands of the woman to whom he consecrated his entire pontificate, the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God and our Mother.

I hope that we will continue to discover the immense treasures in this cherished gift of Our Lady. Let us be inspired to take up the Rosary with confidence as a means to deepen our union with Christ and the Church.

